

PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

AND THE
GODS OF THE
UNDERWORLD



STEPHEN COLE

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Stephen Cole

**BIG
FINISH**

There's a whisper going round that the long-lost temple of the Argian Gods of the Underworld has finally been discovered on the planet Venedel. There's an even quieter whisper that deep inside it lies the Argian Oracle, an ancient artefact that can pinpoint the whereabouts of any soul in the universe. Benny Summerfield sets out to see if this is true – perhaps it can tell her the whereabouts of her missing ex-husband, Jason Kane.

Venedel, however, is under siege from an over-zealous Federation, starving the planet until the people capitulate to its terms. Despite this, a team of Nishtubi mercenaries are running the blockade to supply aid for the Venedelans. But why? They have nothing to gain.

Caught between jingoistic natives, Nishtubi heavies, a plague of ancient killers and the secrets of the Gods of the Underworld, Benny has nowhere to run – and faces a great deal of trouble...

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*This book is for Mike Tucker,
who reminded me it should be fun*

1 The Set-Up

‘Why?’

Irving Braxiatel steepled his fingers and smiled at Benny from behind the polished mahogany of his writing desk.

‘Are you asking why the Argians should build their temple so far from their own world,’ he said smoothly, ‘or why the Earthlink Federation would wish its discovery kept secret?’

‘I mean, why are you telling me about it with that manic gleam in your eyes?’ Benny retorted. ‘You’re exhausting me just by looking at me.’

Braxiatel smiled again in a way that was, luckily for him, as endearing as it was smug. ‘First things first,’ he said, tapping his long, angular nose and rising from his chair. He strode almost merrily across the study to an alcove in the marble wall that housed an imposing statue of a Levithian Graff in full ceremonial armour, one of many in the room. Tall and elegant in his dark suit Braxiatel reminded Benny a little of a pallbearer-judging by that knowing, thin-lipped smile seemingly stuck to his long, pale face, a pallbearer indecently delighted to have recently dispensed with a weighty charge.

In contrast, she reflected, she wasn’t quite dressed for a funeral. In fact, she wasn’t quite dressed full stop. She looked down at her blue cotton pyjamas and scruffy white plimsolls, and ran a hand through her short dark hair, made spiky by restless sleep. Joseph, her digital would-be organising assistant, had woken her at midday as requested the night before, but since she’d only finished drinking at about 9 o’clock that morning she hadn’t quite had the lie-in she’d envisaged. The last thing she needed was Braxiatel summoning her so early in the afternoon.

‘So the other questions don’t trouble you?’ he asked innocently.

Benny folded her arms and sat on the edge of his desk.

‘There’ve been a dozen War Temples discovered all over Argia’s sector of space. Deliberate policy – keep their treasures off-world as a deterrent against invasion, and help indoctrinate neighbouring planets into worshipping their gods.’

‘Very good,’ said Braxiatel approvingly. He plucked some holographic files from under the arm of the statue in the alcove, and sauntered back to his chair.

‘So I don’t see what’s so special about one dedicated to the Gods of the Underworld.’ Benny looked at him sourly over her shoulder. ‘All their temples, without exception, have been found practically empty, cleared out, ransacked – we don’t even know what they kept in them. And despite the rumours and kids’ stories, there’ve been no traps for

the unwary, no cryptic prophecies of doom... Argian temples must rank among the duller in the galaxy, no matter how colourful their names might be.'

'I agree,' Braxiatel nodded, conceding the point. 'Those swashbuckling tales, through history, of brave tomb raiders facing the fire of vengeful Argian apparitions do seem difficult to substantiate with hard evidence. Which leads us back to...'

'Why would Earthlink want to keep this one on Venedel secret?' Benny turned her head back round, rubbing her stiff neck and looking up at the perfect replica of *The Supremacy of Venus* painted on the study's high ceiling. As the goddess gazed down from amid her clouds and cherubim, Benny couldn't help but mouth, 'Bitch' at her and her early-rising radiance. 'Well, it's a Federation world, isn't it? They probably think they have a vested interest. Or maybe they want to keep away nosy art lovers from the Fifth Axis.'

'Oh, there's more to it than rivalry between interplanetary alliances,' Braxiatel said with an air of deliberate mystery.

'Earthlink tolerate the Axis in this sector so long as their warlike tendencies stay the right side of unequivocal and the squabbles take place around the frontier worlds.'

Benny spun her backside around on the shiny desk surface until she was facing Braxiatel cross-legged, able to bring the full weight of her bloodshot gaze on to him. 'You're saying this newly-discovered Argian temple is untouched, aren't you. Ripe for the ransacking, right?'

'Must you sit like that?' Braxiatel commented.

'Worried I'll break your desk?' Benny asked sweetly.

'You'll end up with a stoop,' Braxiatel held out one of the holofiles to Benny. 'Take a look at this.'

The picture depicted a bizarre group clustered around a large stone tablet. Benny squinted but couldn't decipher any markings, only what appeared to be a tiny scrap of silver at its centre. Prominent among the group were two furry creatures, half-man, half-rat, with long, floppy ears protruding through their wide-brimmed hats. Behind them was a spaceship, and Benny recognised the logo emblazoned on its side.

'One of your sponsored expeditions?'

'They've been excavating the Argian Temple of Blood Messengers on Betheral.'

Benny tapped a finger at the rats. 'And with a pair of Waskas on the team, probably in the most obsessive and minute detail.'

'It's a good team,' Braxiatel agreed. 'And that detritus on the tablet points to evidence that the temples weren't sacked and looted after all. While it is Argian in nature, it's from a later era than the temple itself.'

Benny pushed herself off the desk and faced him, back straight and

chest out. 'Meaning, the Argians came back to check up on it. And found it looted.' Braxiatel raised his eyebrows a fraction, and Benny gave a frustrated yell as she realised what he was driving at. 'Or they came back and shifted their treasures to a new temple on a *different* world.'

Braxiatel nodded. 'A moveable feast to protect against hungry predators.'

Benny placed the holofile back on Braxiatel's desk. 'So, if you've got all the answers, why *are* the Federation wanting to keep it secret? They want the treasure for themselves, is that it?' She broke off. 'Where have I heard the name Venedel, lately?'

'From me,' said Braxiatel, looking at her wryly. 'Just as the Fifth Axis set up a blockade around Kasgrad –'

'Don't remind me,' Benny said with feeling.

– so the Earthlink Federation is applying sanctions against the Venedelan people.'

'Aren't the Federation meant to be the good guys?'

Braxiatel got up once more from his chair and crossed over to the plush sofa set against the far wall. Benny marvelled at the way he relaxed into it without the buffed brown leather squeaking once, even when he patted the seat beside him and bade her join him. Benny recognised the signs of an impending lecture, and decided if not to grin and bear it, then at least to keep her mouth shut.

'Whereas Argia allowed its interplanetary empire to fall apart over a millennium of sad decline, Venedel has been stuck in a primitive, feudal rut for most of its history. The Argians invaded Venedel time and time again, and each time destroyed all books, presses, all means of learning.'

'Keeping the people down?' wondered Benny, emphasising the last word by slumping beside him. 'Seems a bit bloody-minded.'

'Indeed. Perhaps they did so to further safeguard the secret of their treasures' location.'

'On the assumption that people that can't read or write can't talk?'

'Or that an ignorant civilisation won't know what's being kept on their own doorsteps.' Braxiatel sprawled back in the sofa. 'In any case, Venedel joined the Federation some thirty years ago. But recently the planet's rulers, most vociferously a certain Thane of Mahel, have voted to withdraw. And around the same time, word started filtering through of alleged human rights atrocities on the planet... seems there's some kind of ethnic cleansing in process, but if so it's quite unprecedented.'

'Hence the sanctions...' Benny mused.

'Officially,' Braxiatel agreed. 'But local powers in that region of space feel that the Federation's motives may be slightly less than

altruistic.'

Benny looked at him quizzically. 'To do with the Temple?'

'Certainly, while Venedel belongs to the Federation they have a better claim to a share in the likely riches and treasures to be discovered...' Braxiatel's eyes narrowed. 'On the other hand, what is interesting, is that now that news of the temple's discovery has gone public, my attempts to be allowed to fund the excavations on Venedel have been rebuffed.'

Benny frowned. 'How much were you offering?'

Braxiatel clearly found the question a little distasteful. 'Far more, I'll wager, than the Nishtubi Archaeological Society were ready to offer.'

'The Nishtubi?' Benny was outraged. 'That bunch of mercenary chancers? What do they know about archaeology?'

'Not much, it would seem,' muttered Braxiatel. 'The society was only founded five years ago.'

'And yet they've been allowed in through the blockade to help excavate the temple?'

'An expedition got through shortly before the blockade was set up,' Braxiatel confirmed. 'I don't know if they're still there. Alarming, isn't it.'

'Well, we can't stand for it!' Exhausted by her sudden outburst, Benny emphasised her words by slouching further back against the comforting cool of the leather sofa.

'I was hoping you'd say that,' Braxiatel said, smiling.

'Because I'd like you to lead a team of your own, get in there and show them how the job should really be done.'

Benny groaned. 'Oh, now wait a minute...'

Braxiatel patted her on the arm and got up himself. 'No, *you* wait a minute. There's something else I'd like to show you. It might just help you make up your mind.'

Ms Jones walked primly through the corridors of Braxiatel's Mansionhouse, fussing to herself about the loneliness of command as she headed for her office in the Administration wing. It was only herself and gravity that held this planetoid together. Why idiots like Crofton in the garden couldn't respect that fact was beyond her.

She peered myopically ahead at the sound of slow, hollow footsteps some distance away. A figure, presumably having just emerged from Archaeology, was coming towards her.

Checking her grey hair was scraped as far off her forehead as it would go, and allowing her face to pinch itself into its typical expression of disapproval, she prepared to meet the visitor.

'Oh, Benny, it's you,' she said in surprise, her face softening automatically. 'I've not seen you in that, er, *outfit* before...'

‘That’s because I go to bed in it,’ Benny said vaguely, her eyes not focused and clearly not aware of the blush she’d caused Ms Jones’s cheeks to suffer.

‘Retiring early?’ Ms Jones enquired lightly.

‘Rising late,’ Benny said quietly. ‘And I can’t see myself sleeping for quite a little while.’

Ms Jones watched Benny weave an uncertain path down the corridor and back towards her room, as if she were in some kind of trance. Turning back towards Archaeology, Ms Jones discerned Mr Braxiatel standing in the doorway, his face partly in shadow so it was impossible to read the expression there.

2 Scum and Villainy

Bernice Summerfield's diary. Entry for March 12th 2600

Swooping out of the spaceport again in a Brax shuttle, I thought I was feeling indifferent to the whole episode ahead. Another straw to clutch at, another flight into mystery with a promise waiting at the end of it. One I had a pretty good idea would never be kept.

I thought that, at first.

But even as the shuttle nudged against the tiny tug of Brax's gravity I recognised a kind of fizzing deep down in my stomach, a hard little tablet of apathy dissolving into effervescence. I'd soon be geared up to go straw-clutching with the best of them.

Braxiatel has me so sussed. The Argians were an indomitable race in their heyday and no one embraced the myth of their own invincibility more fiercely than they did. Myth's the right word, too – not just the fact that, like all good empires in the end, Argia collapsed disastrously in on itself; but because of the way their technology evolved. They combined the mystical with the scientific pretty much from day one. They had rudimentary space travel when the civilisations around them were still rooting about for nuts and berries. And of course, any close scientific study of that technology today is impossible since the Argians managed to destroy not only their entire civilisation but also practically everything that civilisation achieved. All gone forever.

So all we know is the legendary nomenclature, all of it fixated on war gods, or demons and spirits, which Argia bragged were the source of their powers. I remember it from my degree course. The Ghost Fleet that took Zerinzar, The Blood Messengers of the Ninth that laid waste to Anthrazar... They sound to me now more like the names you'd give to a bunch of long-haired guitarists with too many effects pedals, but in their day these endless war-bringers were the stuff of legend.

And of course, with their conquests dependent on the favours of the gods, the Argians had to find a way to communicate with them. Well, there can't be a race in existence that hasn't learned that just praying is never enough.

So the Argians made themselves an oracle. In Archaeology; Braxiatel showed me some ancient; nonsensical fragments that his Waskas unearthed, details of what he believes are some kind of schematic for the thing. But the Argians didn't ask for as much from their all-seeing eye as is traditional. All they wanted to know was the whereabouts of the leaders of the worlds they wanted to conquer. And I remember now, the Argian Oracle, a hotline straight through to their dark, Stygian gods, was said to be able to pinpoint the location of any living soul in the universe.

And that's why I knew I had to come. To see the thing for myself.

To take it; before some bunch of Nishtubi vandals do. Braxiatel wants it to sit it side-by-side with his Oracle of the Lost in the Small Trianon. But I want it first; just for a moment; so I can ask it just one thing.

Where is Jason Kane? Where is my ex-husband?

Straw-clutching. Yes, I know. Why should the oracle work? Even if it ever did, even if it's even there, it's been lying dormant for thousands of years. But I've seen too many things in this universe not to be able to hope. Even if it's not Argian spirits with a phone book inside that holy sphere, even if something dread and nameless and heartily evil is waiting on the other end of the line for my call, it has to be done. It's an option, and a chance that has to be taken. Phew. Have I convinced myself enough yet?

I've got a little while yet to keep trying, anyway. This shuttle is en route to the Pan Leica spaceport, where those two Waskas – they're called Arko and Forno – and my competition, another archaeologist, a human, called Shell, will rendezvous in twenty-four hours. By which time I'll have landed, disembarked, and hired me a decent pilot and a fast ship. If I'm going to be back running planetary blockades, I want to know I've got the best chance possible of getting through.

In space, I'm sure not even an ancient mythical oracle can hear you scream.

[Diary extract ends]

* * *

Benny screwed up her nose. She was sure she could smell the Pan Leica spaceport even before the shuttle doors had opened.

There was the whiff of exotic sweat, of unidentified meats sizzling on skillets in a hundred stalls, mixed in with the all-pervading stink of drink and smoke and engine oil.

When the doors did slide abruptly open it was like someone had found the volume and the brightness controls inside Benny's head and set both to max. Two suns dazzled her, the white sandstone of the spaceport complex heightening the glare. The heat was already burning her bare arms, so she shrugged on an old jumper and pulled her sunglasses from her khaki trousers. With these in place, she took a swig from the water bottle on a leather thong round her neck before letting some spill over her shirt collar to cool her skin.

Around her there came a confused gabbling in a dozen alien tongues, mingling with the blare of echoing indecipherables from the spaceport tannoy systems. A clutch of purple-headed creatures were waving meagre wads of money at her for the sale of her shuttle, and rival gangs of shuttle-valets were already jostling each other violently as they competed for her attention.

Benny hefted her rucksack on to her shoulder, checked her watch to

see how long till her team was due, then grimaced as she realised it was still set to Brax time. She unzipped her bag and a white sphere bobbed magically out of it, prompting a slightly larger wad of bills to be waved at Benny by the purple aliens.

‘There is a function I can perform for you, Professor Summerfield?’ asked the sphere haughtily.

‘Thank you, Joseph, there is,’ Benny said, nudging one of the purple things away with a steel toecap in case her digital personal assistant started getting some not very useful ideas about his value.

Joseph bobbed downward a couple of feet. ‘You wish your chronometer reset to local time,’ he said, wearily.

Benny beamed at Joseph, until the white sphere reflected the sunlight into her eyes in a sudden flash – quite deliberately, she was sure. ‘Stay close,’ she muttered, and left behind the bizarre throng ringing her shuttle and walked into the smoke and crowds of the spaceport.

Benny smacked her lips with a satisfied sigh as she drained the dregs of her wine. It felt good to get a drink inside her after the long boring space flight over here. As she handed her glass back to the barman, she noticed a man in a long, black leather coat looking furtively over at her. His companion, an old boy with neat silver hair seated stiffly beside him, turned to look at her too. Never seen a girl before? wondered Benny as she ordered two more drinks. Then again, looking around, they probably hadn’t. The *Bar Bolostophus* was *such* a hole.

It wasn’t long now before Arko, Forno and Shell were due to arrive in their Brax-sponsored flyer and come and meet her here. Benny aimed to have a ship and a pilot by then, so they could set off for Venedel without further delay. Dedicated newscasts on the monitors lining the bar were showing a steady influx of Earthlink vessels approaching the planet, like a colony of silverfish infesting Venedel space. Watching them was a powerful prompt to get her backside in gear and out of this hole as swiftly as possible.

Fingers crossed. A little sweet-talking of both the butch woman in charge of the arrivals terminal, and of Joseph with some search parameters, had enabled her to download the details of five possible pilots recently arrived at the spaceport, with proven track records in long-haulage routes navigating galactic trouble spots. No visual ID for any of them, unfortunately, so Benny had been forced to ask round. She’d located two on her list, but one had just met with a very nasty accident while unloading his cargo with a malfunctioning droid, and the other had wasted no time once on the ground before drugging himself up to his one great eyeball on a half-kilo of gash. Benny didn’t like to think where the cyclops would be taking off to over the next

few days, but it was clearly a solo flight only.

Then, remembering it was traditional to find daredevil pilots in spaceport bars, since long, long ago, Benny had decided to conduct her investigations in this flea pit. Not that conversation was always easy over the din of the jukebox and the shrieks and squawks of excited chatter from the packed tables lining the hall. And just making eye contact with some of the bizzarros here demanded a few drinks to loosen her up a little. Case in point was pilot number three on the list, who she'd just located and swapped business cards with.

She turned back to the thing squatting beside her, more turnip than man by the look of its squat, earthy body; though it spoke English quite well. The odd protuberance that she guessed was its head resembled an over-large bunch of grapes, but in each onyx oval was a watery iris, staring at her earnestly.

'Look, no questions asked, but I could really use the money,' the thing warbled. 'And I promise you I'm good. I'm real good. Especially in a crisis. Really.'

Benny couldn't quite picture this creature heroically poised over the controls of a spaceship, but she smiled politely.

'You've certainly had a lot of experience,' she managed to say. 'Working the Tartarus –'

'The Tartarus run is a *bitch!*' declared the turnip creature with feeling. 'Dragging all that livestock halfway across the roughest space you can enter... asteroids, strange matter, singularity junctures... a blast through a blockade would be a change for the better after Tartarus, let me tell *you*.'

Benny checked her watch. She *could* go with this thing. Its requested fee wasn't exorbitant. Looking at the way it was perched unnaturally on the bar stool, she shuddered to think about how comfortable the ship might be inside, but at least it would mean their requisite pilot was in the bag and she could kick back and relax a little until the others arrived.

'Okay,' Benny said, extending a hand to it. 'You've got a deal.'

'Thank *you!*' A flood of sticky water gushed out from the grape-eyes, and what felt and smelt like a wet fish extended from the thing's body and pressed itself into her hand. Benny smiled awkwardly as her stomach turned. 'Would you excuse me one moment?' she managed. 'I need to use the bathroom.'

A couple of minutes later, wiping moisture from her eyes, and only barely in possession of the contents of her stomach, Benny stared incredulously at the sight of her turnip-like pilot being carted out on a stretcher by two paramedics.

'That's my pilot!' she cried. 'You can't take him, he's needed!'

She went back to her bar-stool to find the man in the leather coat

who she'd noticed earlier was now sitting in the turnip's seat. There was no sign of his silver-haired companion.

'What the hell happened here?' Benny asked.

'Some form of mild panic attack,' the man said casually. 'You must've got him overexcited. He'll be okay, but out of action for a couple of days.'

'Uh-huh,' she said distantly. Benny found her concern for her erstwhile pilot dwindling as she took in this man's appearance properly. He was, she decided, the bad-looking sort your mother always warned you about – tall and lean with dark, ruffled hair, a few days' stubble and clear blue eyes. His good looks were marred only slightly by the inelegant hook of his nose, but Benny decided she could live with that for the moment, and wouldn't give him the third degree about it being rude to stare at single girls from across bars for the time being.

'My name is Starl, Starl Stanmore. And if you need a pilot, Miss...?'

'Professor Bernice Summerfield.' She was gratified when this pilot extended a dry, clean hand for her to shake, although the urge to rush off to the ladies didn't leave her altogether. 'But you'd better watch out. Every time I find a pilot, something awful happens to him.'

'Where do you want to go?'

'Venedel,' Benny said. 'You'll have to run a blockade, but I'll pay you well. And...' She trailed off as three newcomers on the far side of the bar took her attention – a blonde girl with two Waskas. She gave Starl her most beguiling smile. 'And you'll have to leave in about five minutes, if that's okay?'

'Let me make a quick call,' Starl said, smiling back.

Benny almost skipped across the bar to greet her new team.

She started with the Waskas. 'Arko or Forno?'

They looked at each other suspiciously. 'Who wants to know?' said the larger one, who looked generally scruffier than his slimmer friend.

'Use your head, Arko,' said the blonde girl. 'This must be our glorious leader!' Shell's long hair was held up in scruffy, sweaty bunches, more to keep it out of her face in this heat than in an attempt to look younger. But looking at her, Benny decided a little bitchily, every little would help. Shell had clearly seen plenty of field experience. Her face was almost orange from the sun, and deep lines made her seem prematurely aged.

Nevertheless, her smile was gorgeous, wide and packed with white teeth almost as large as the Waskas'.

'This is Forno,' Shell added indicating the smaller Waska.

'He's a bit shy.'

Benny shook his paw. 'Hold on a moment,' she said, crossing back to fetch Starl who was just putting his phone away into one of the

pockets of his heavy black leather coat.

‘Come on, meet the others!’ She cheekily delved into his coat pocket to grab his hand. ‘I can’t believe my luck, you just coming along like this. I hope you have a fast ship...’

She stopped speaking as, along with his hand, something else came out of the pocket. It was a syringe.

She looked sharply at him. ‘You’ll be flying us clean, thank you very much,’ she said loudly.

‘It’s not what you think...’ Starl was looking round shiftily, worried they were causing a scene. Certainly, they seemed to have attracted some attention from some drinkers the far side of the bar.

But Benny was taken with the half-full syringe. A viscous fluid slithered down its side. Benny recognised the consistency from bitter experience of field trip accidents. She sniffed at it, then grimaced. ‘Adrenalin compound?’ No, there was something else, too...

Dead fish.

Benny mentally kicked herself – how could she have been so gullible. A sign of old age. Probably. She glared at Starl. ‘You gave my turnip an adrenalin shot, must’ve sent his heart rate through the roof! Why?’

Starl looked, irritatingly, still more attractive when he was sheepish. ‘I really need this job.’

‘What?’ Benny continued to gape.

‘And I knew I wouldn’t make your list of eligible pilots.’

Benny folded her arms. ‘Why? Because you go around drugging people? Did you peddle that ton of gash to number two on my list?’

Starl at least had the grace to look embarrassed. ‘It was his own supply, I swear. He couldn’t wait to get busy with it. Look, I really need the money. I’m new round here, and... well, since I lost my permit...’

Benny threw up her arms. ‘You *lost* the only thing that authorises you to be a pilot at all?’

‘In a poker game.’

‘Oh goddess,’ said Benny, sighing and glancing across at her puzzled team still waiting for her. ‘What am I going to tell –’

‘That’s him!’ shouted one of the men from the far side of the bar. That’s the one who messed up the cargo droid, crushed Rencelaw’s legs in the pallet loader!’

Benny looked at him, affronted. ‘You did *what*?’

‘He was barely scratched!’ Starl protested.

Meanwhile, a small lynch mob was being assembled. ‘That must be his woman,’ someone called.

‘In his dreams!’ Benny snapped automatically.

Starl looked downright nervous now. ‘Do you think we could

continue this conversation somewhere else?’

‘What, in prison perhaps?’ She called across to Shell and the Waskas. ‘Come on, we’re getting out of here!’

A burly man marched over towards her. ‘You’re going nowhere, lady.’

He laid a heavy hand on Starl’s shoulder, trying to pull him backwards. Starl spun round, knocked away the hand with one arm and punched the man full in the face, who cannoned backwards into the small crowd behind him.

‘After you?’ Starl suggested to Benny, shaking his bruised fist.

Benny ducked as a bar stool sailed over her head, apparently a signal for every bruiser in the place spoiling for a fight to get up and have a go. ‘Yeah,’ she decided, diving for the door.

‘After me.’

‘What’s going on?’ Arko said gruffly.

‘You’re just in time to see the leader of your expedition strung up by a baying mob.’

‘Why are they chasing you?’ Forno asked in wonder.

She looked at him wryly. ‘It’s one of the problems of being single and attractive in the dangerous world of interplanetary archaeology. Come on.’

Some tentacled thing tried to block her way, but Benny leapt over it and stumbled through the doorway. At the sight of Shell and the Waskas, the creature reared up menacingly.

‘Want some, do you?’ Arko said. Without waiting for a reply, he headbutted the thing and knocked it out of the way. Shell and Forno both looked terrified.

‘Outside, you two,’ said Benny. ‘Go on!’

Another brutal looking monster, propelled by a hefty kick from Starl, staggered towards them. It raised a fist to swing at Arko, who got in first, doubling the thing up with a punch to the stomach.

‘Do you apply the same delicacy to your archaeological work?’ Benny enquired, arms folded.

‘I’m like this *because* of my archaeological work,’ Arko growled back, with a sweet little smile. ‘Dusting this, tweezering that, careful with so-and-so. It’s no wonder I’m ready for a fight at the end of the day.’

‘You’re in luck, then,’ panted Starl, running to join them.

‘Since I met you, clearly not,’ Benny said acidly. ‘Now, clear off. It’s you they’re after, not me.’ Grabbing Arko, she pushed through the heavy swing doors and squinted as the fierce sunshine bleached her vision. ‘Shell, Forno, I think we’ve been barred. Let’s try somewhere else.’

‘But you need a pilot!’ Starl’s voice came behind her.

There was an almighty crash from the *Bar Bolostophus*. Benny turned to find twenty or thirty assorted uglies, one of whom seemed to be breaking a heavy door into usable clubs for his friends.

Shell gulped. 'I think we need an army.'

3 New Dawn

Benny and her team ran hell for leather through the aisles and hangars that made up the spaceport, desperately trying to give their pursuers the slip. Benny couldn't believe how somewhere so overwhelmingly bright could still be so dusty and dirty. She looked at Forno, running beside her, wondering how he was doing in this heat – but beneath the thin layer of ginger fur, his face was blanched completely white.

Suddenly a dark figure burst out of hiding in front of them.

Shell shrieked, as they all came bundling to a halt.

'Quick, down here.' It was Starl, panting heavily.

'How'd you get ahead of us?'

'Short cut. Told you, I'm a good pilot, I know where I'm going.'

Benny looked at the others, shrugged, and soon they were all piling through a gap in some corrugated iron into the relative cool of a spaceship hangar. Arko and Benny manhandled some crates up against the gap to block it, then they joined the others hiding behind a large, sorry wreck of a spaceship.

Forno looked round. 'These ships have seen better days,' he observed.

'Look at the notices,' Shell pointed out. 'They've all been impounded.'

Benny considered more closely the battered hulk before them. It had probably seemed quite impressive when new, sometime in the 22nd century. Now it was falling apart, streaked with rust and oil, patched up with scrap iron and sloppy solder.

'Good thinking, Starl,' Benny murmured. 'They'd expect us to try and get out of here in a functioning ship, not hang around a grounded dinosaur like this.'

Starl scowled as he tried to catch his breath. 'Do you mind? This is my ship.'

Benny released a long, soft moan. '*This... is your ship?*'

'That's right,' he said proudly. 'The *New Dawn*. She may be getting on a little but she can outclass anything in this dive.'

Just as a long and offensive tirade of abuse was about to be aimed at Starl, Forno frantically shushed everyone as heavy footsteps came nearer.

'They went through there!' a gurgling voice said.

'That's torn it,' muttered Benny. 'Terrific. This just gets better and better.'

'Your ship is impounded?' Shell stared at Starl. 'Doesn't that slightly hamper you offering your services as a pilot?'

‘Oh, these walls wouldn’t stand in her way,’ Starl said proudly, weathering an even more hostile parade of horrified expressions. ‘She can knock them down flat. I mean it. She’ll get you to Venedel, no problem.’

There was a sudden banging and clattering from the far end of the hangar, and a raising of voices.

Forno yelped and swallowed hard. ‘No problem apart from that gang of yobs.’

‘Didn’t take them long, did it?’ Arko said gruffly. ‘If they catch us in here they’ll pull your old wreck apart and beat our brains out with it.’

‘Nicely put.’ Benny stared dismally up at the rickety ship, and felt her heart sink into her shoes.

‘Come aboard?’ Starl said brightly, opening a rusty hatch in the ship’s hull.

Benny sighed and clambered inside. ‘I don’t see that we have much choice,’ she said.

Minutes later, Starl had led them all at a breathless run through the narrow corridors of the *New Dawn* to the cockpit.

‘What a dump,’ Arko said ungraciously.

‘Surprise, surprise,’ Shell agreed, leaning against him while she got her breath and pressing her head against his chest.

‘Do you mind leaving my ship alone?’ A low engine note had started up. Starl was flicking down banks of switches, keying in the ignition sequence. ‘I’m trying to concentrate.’

‘Look!’ Forno squeaked, pointing at the viewscreen.

A huge mob had now managed to push its way past whatever officials may have been guarding the official entrance into the hangar, and was making its violent way through the place, setting about each ship in turn with everything from iron bars to energy weapons.

The unhealthy grinding of the old ship’s engines rose to a swell, and then the ship lurched forwards. The crowd of yobs looked up in astonishment, then started heading their way.

‘Hold on,’ Starl said, and turned the *New Dawn* sharply right.

The hangar wall rushed up to meet them.

Swearing, Benny threw herself into the co-pilot’s seat. The whole ship rattled and shook as the flimsy metal wall pinched and gave way. Suddenly they were back out in bright sunshine, panicking crowds scattering from their path like farmyard chickens.

‘Some runway!’ Shell gasped, clutching on to Forno.

‘Oh yeah, by the way,’ Starl said, grinning sheepishly at the others as he finished keying in the sequence. ‘You might like to find something to hold on to.’

‘I might just try your neck, pal,’ Arko said, moving threateningly

towards him.

But just as he was taking a step forward Arko found himself flat on his back as the *New Dawn* burst forward like a dog catching sight of a rabbit and charging off. The air thumped out of Benny's lungs. Eyes bulging, she saw the bright, manic landscape of Pan Leica shrink from the ship's impromptu take off, shimmering on the shaking scanners.

'Are you crazy?' Shell gasped. 'We've got no official flight path!'

Starl looked at her and smiled. 'Well, it's a big sky,' he yelled over the roar of the engines. 'We should be all right.'

Benny suddenly had a feeling of impending doom more profound than any she had ever known. Starl punched some co-ordinates into a keypad next to the flight controls that was clearly not part of the *New Dawn*'s original spec and hit a button. The ship accelerated away, and the force that suddenly pinned Benny back in her seat felt a good few letters further along the alphabet than G.

Bernice Summerfield's diary. Entry for March 14th 2600

I should go on these insane trips into space more often. No, really.

They're always such fun.

Still, we're all alive; which is the main thing – and at the end of the day it's only Starl Stan more who's recorded on Pan Leica's most wanted list for performing a fly-by of Police Control at record speed before going on to play chicken with their traffic control satellites. I guess it's either proved that Starl's a top-class professional pilot or that he's just extraordinarily lucky Whatever, I guess, just so long as his luck holds till we make planet-fall on Venedel.

The New Dawn seems to have hidden depths, just like its owner. Whatever Start's got plugged in to the engines, it threw us half-way across this sector in just a few minutes. I don't know what other modifications he might've made, but unfortunately he seems to have left the toilets well alone since the date of purchase.

And the cabins, such as they are, are bare and drab and cheerless.

This ship, for all its rotten appearance would have you think, doesn't seem to have been much lived in.

Still, not long now and the fun will really begin. And my merry little band can't wait to get started. Arko's been prowling about the place like a caged animal, muttering about sorting out Nishtubi cowboys. Still, for all his Glaswegian hardnut affectations, Shell keeps pointing out he's a gentle giant. She's all right. Very serious, quite timid... Apparently she wrote a highly-praised treatise on why the Argians depicted their gods with big boggly eyes... Hmm, must check it out sometime. She graduated from my school of study, and I think my reputation there since has been talked up a little whiter than white. When I offered her a brandy for the shock once we'd dropped back to cruising speed, she looked at me like I was handing

out cat's pee or something (perhaps it's a good job she didn't taste it after all).

Forno took some happily enough. His teeth were chattering so hard as he swigged from the flask that he's scratched the chrome.

He's a sweetie, big-eyed and skittish. One of those types who'd be happier avoiding the real world altogether: I can see him compiling endless dry reference works in big libraries for the rest of his days. He doesn't like field work much, but funding from Braxiatel was irresistible – he's desperate to see the planetoid, see all the Collection. When I talk about it his mouth just plops open, it's so cute. And when I refer to 'Ol' Irvy', his jaw hits the ground.

There's not much to do on board the Dawn. Starl has cooked for us all each night – if you can call what he does to food cookery

– but apart from the odd chat with me about what we can expect on Venedel, he's stayed in his cabin watching holovids. I can't make him out at all. Still, a bit of intrigue in life is healthy isn't it.

Healthier than running Earthlink Federation blockades, anyway.

That's still bothering me a bit. The siege has been in place for the best part of two months now. It seems Venedel suffers regularly from bad harvests and I guess it's come to depend on food from outside. And now, on what seems to be, by all accounts, the flimsiest of evidence, the Federation are starving them out. Sends out a nice clear message to all the other worlds in the Earthlink...

But then if the Venedelans are committing atrocities on their own people...

My thoughts keep chasing their tails. But what bothers me most is why a contingent of Nishtubi would be so desperate to excavate an ancient temple on a world under siege... and why someone high-up in the Federation seems to be letting them. And these sanctions, of course, are keeping all other, legitimate parties (like mine – yeah, a real party!) from coming anywhere near the temple to see what's going on. I smell a rat (not a Waska).

So the only way to sort my head out is to risk getting it blown off running the blockade. Ho hum. I should be an old hand at this.

Next thing you know, I'll be vaulting the Dendronian siege-barricades over on Grombi. Bernice Summerfield, this is your life.

WHOA! That was the most enormous ~

[Diary extract ends]–

Benny reached the cockpit first. A green-and-toffee swirl filled the scanner screen, Venedel in all its close-up glory.

'So. There's Venedel. I take it that explosion signals the start of yet

another exciting close-shave?' she asked, smiling sweetly.

'Maybe,' Starl said, shrugging. 'The Feds have seeded Venedel's atmosphere with mines. One of them just went off for no apparent reason, and there are enough ships in the immediate area to come sniffing round to see if its warranty is invalidated.'

Benny stiffened. 'Have they seen us?'

'Don't think so. I've been trying to compute a course between the mines so that there's always some mass between us and the Fed scanners.'

'Can it be done?'

'Keep your fingers crossed.'

Arko came bristling into the cockpit, just ahead of Shell and Forno. 'I'll uncross them and put them round your neck, pal, if you throw me about one more time.'

'Do you think you could throttle me *after* I've got us safely down?' Starl said drily.

'Let him concentrate, Arko,' Benny said. 'We could be in trouble.' She explained the situation to the others, who took the news with a stony silence.

'Well you were warned there'd be a risk, weren't you?' Benny snapped, made uneasy by their long faces.

'Mr Braxiatel said he has the utmost faith in you, whatever the situation,' said Shell softly, 'and that we should too.'

'He also told us not to tell you that,' Arko added gruffly.

Great, thought Benny. No wonder Shell's been acting like a bug crawled up her backside. Never mind my learned colleagues, it's Braxiatel who's been building me up as some super space heroine, while I've been acting like a drunken hooligan from the very first moment.

And I may have saddled us with a pilot who's going to get every one of us killed.

'This route should be kind to us,' Starl said, tapping in the last few figures with satisfaction.

'How big are the mines?' Benny wondered, grateful for the excuse to look away from her worried charges.

'I think their real purpose is just to tip off the Feds that someone's trying to get through their defences,' Starl said. 'But big enough to hurt, I'd imagine. Like running into the back of a parked truck.'

There was a sudden impact, and a glaring white light as a cable shorted out overhead. Shell shrieked as the *New Dawn* tilted alarmingly to one side.

'The berk's done it again!' moaned Arko in disbelief from the cockpit floor.

'That *was* like running into the back of a parked truck,' Benny said

once she'd checked everyone was superficially okay.

'What was it?' Shell asked nervously.

'Scanner's out!' Starl smacked his hand down on top of it.

'Let me see,' Forno said hurriedly, and dived under the console.

'He's good with electrics,' Arko explained.

'So it would seem,' noted Benny as the scanner image snapped back into flickering life, soon stabilising to show nothing but space ahead of them, blackness that seemed to have dissolved Venedel down to a thin green crescent. Then the picture shimmered, and a boxy metal shape appeared on the screen.

'We ran into that!' declared Forno in amazement, scuttling back out from under the console.

'Nishtubi ship,' Starl said. 'Running the same safe path as us.'

'Just not so damned fast, it would seem,' Shell noted, pushing back her hair.

'A Nishtubi ship? What is this, reinforcements?' Benny shook her head, completely thrown by the discovery. 'And with a cloaking thingy? How'd they get hold of that?'

'Well, it's broken now. I hope it's insured against acts of "silly sod riding into the back of you",' Arko said dourly.

'Every Earthlink ship in the sector's going to come looking after this,' Shell snapped. 'Get us out of here.'

'You may not have noticed but we seem to be in a queue,'

Starl said tersely. 'If we overtake we'll hit -'

A fireball erupted ahead, glowing fiercely on the port side of the Nishtubi vessel.

'One of those,' muttered Benny. 'Big enough to hurt all right.'

And then two balls of solid white energy smacked into the side of the boxy ship. Another silent explosion flowered, and the Nishtubi craft began to rotate, like a stubby spear spinning in flight.

'Twin bolts! That was Federation fire!' Shell shouted, crouching down behind Benny's seat.

'Just a warning broadside,' Benny reckoned. 'Get audio on-line, see what they're saying.'

Starl flicked the switch several times. 'Nothing. You know, it's possible we're close enough to the Nishtubi ship for the Federation to confuse our mass with theirs. If the Nishtubi ship's going down, we can follow in its slipstream.'

The *New Dawn* rocked with the twin impacts of another Federation broadside. Arko groaned.

'It's not possible at all,' Shell said sourly.

'They opened fire, with no warning!' Forno cried. 'That's not fair!'

'Going to some lengths to keep this planet isolated, aren't they?' Benny put both hands against her temples. 'We need to follow that

Nishtubi ship, find out what's going on down there.'

Another two blasts rocked the side of the *New Dawn*, and emergency lighting flooded the cockpit bright red. 'Structural damage to warp core,' Starl cried as the hum of the ship's engines began to rise and a klaxon blared out an irritating warning. 'Energy leakage. Hull fracture. Auto-piloting systems down.'

Benny stared at him aghast. '*Down?*'

Starl looked at her, ruefully. 'I'm glad you want to follow that ship down to Venedel. Looks like that's the only place we *can* go. Very, very quickly.'

The cabin rocked again as two more blasts impacted. Benny felt Shell's hand gripping her arm as the noise of the engines grew louder and the temperature began to rise.

The crescent of sickly colour that was Venedel grew larger and larger, filling the scanner screen.

4 Somewhere to Crash

The Thane of Mahel, ruler of all the land from Shadow Coast to the Fungus Mountains, Third Chieftain of all Venedel, looked up into the night sky from his Throne of Solitude, stroking his moustache with a well-manicured hand.

As usual, the magnificent, rough-hewn rock of the seat was making his buttocks ache.

Mahel felt now that perhaps he'd been a little rash in expelling every Earthlink Federation advance outright from his palace. The cushion in particular had been a true boon.

Shifting uncomfortably in the throne, perched out on the sacred Burial Hill of Monarchs, it pained Mahel still more to think of how Venedel's fledgling relationship with the Federation, designed to bring such prosperity to his people, had instead brought them to this. And brought down the old, old curse upon them too. Mahel *knew* it somehow.

The dark blanket of night was scattered with many lights.

'I wish there were only stars in the sky,' the Thane remarked moodily to the ever-present Hoodath, royal scribe and most faithful servant, squatting by his side.

'Indeed, my lord,' Hoodath sighed, his tongue flicking habitually over his lips. 'Shall I transcribe your wish?'

'Do so. Capture my regal solitude.'

Hoodath scrawled frantically with his quill pen, the bald spot in his short mousy hair gleaming in the moonlight. 'Your anguish is poetic indeed, your majesty.'

'I trust so,' muttered Mahel. 'It would not do to add to our troubles with bad prose.'

'Never, your majesty.'

Mahel shot a sideways glance at Hoodath, who was sheepishly scribbling something out and starting again.

The Thane wished so hard that the same could be done in life as in stories. There was so much he wished to erase.

'Has the latest cleansing been undertaken?' Mahel asked distantly.

'It has, your majesty. Far inside the forest. I refer to it as the *pristine purging*.'

Mahel screwed up his mighty nose. 'Well, don't. That's ghastly. Do at least try to wring some... pathos from the act.

Some poetry.' He paused. 'Have there been any more sightings of...?'

'Renad reports he is almost certain that the forests are still clear.'

'Almost...' The Thane sighed. 'Actually, since this is the official

history of our people, perhaps play this down. To dwell on such... unpleasant affairs...'

Hoodath took a deep shaky breath, flicked back a page and crossed a sharp black line through it. Mahel sighed softly. He knew that his scribe was writing less and less each day.

Something caught his eye in the twinkling darkness. Two points of light, getting larger and brighter.

'What are those, Hoodath?' the Thane demanded, jumping from his lofty throne and pointing. 'Falling stars? Or have the Federation tired now of starving us, of caging us in like animals in our impoverished world? Do they now attack?'

Hoodath looked a little uncomfortable at his majesty's outburst. 'I hope myself, sire, that it may be more aid arriving from our Nishtubi friends through the barricades. Spaceships.'

The lights were getting brighter, and a tortured, roaring sound started to devour the peace of the night.

'Noisier aid than we're used to,' the Thane said thoughtfully.

'Perhaps it is an omen,' Hoodath said brightly. That with the tiger might of our allies we shall claw Federation blood from the very skies they patrol.'

The lights grew larger, dragging the terrible rumbling noise along with them. 'Or more likely,' Mahel said crushingly, 'if these falling stars *are* spaceships, they are going to crash land in the woods with the loss of all aboard, and a few more of our people will starve to death as a result.'

'Our people's heroic sacrifice will not go unrecorded,'

Hoodath said solemnly.

'That,' said the Thane with a great sigh, 'will be of the utmost comfort to them, I feel sure.'

Benny clamped her hands over her ears. Now she felt she really understood what was meant by the phrase 'screaming engines', she was tempted to join in. The *New Dawn* was shrieking as if pulling itself apart.

Arko landed a heavy paw on Starl's shoulder. 'Escape pods?'

'There's only one left.'

'One?' shrieked Forno.

Shell looked sick. 'How many can it hold?'

'Designed for two,' Starl muttered. 'Three at a push.'

'You three,' Benny said, heavily. 'Co on, you'd better take it,'

She felt calm and detached as the words fell out of her mouth, and during the half-hearted protestations that followed. But this whole foul-up was her responsibility, and she knew it. She shuddered. Braxiatel had made her out to be a hero, but this lot might make her

into some kind of sainted martyr. It didn't bear thinking about. They said uncomfortable goodbyes.

'Get going,' Starl told them. 'Follow the yellow line through to the aft section.'

Arko bundled Shell and Forno before him without another word. Benny sat down heavily in her chair and strapped herself in. She almost smiled. It seemed such a futile gesture.

'Are you really going to attempt a manual landing with a bleary scanner as your only reference?' she said.

Starl flicked a single red switch and the ceiling of the cockpit started to come loose, sliding away to reveal a protective plate of thick glass over their heads. The wide-open grey-green view of Venedel's upper atmosphere washed over them. Benny felt horribly exposed, and her heart started racing even faster. The ship started to shake.

'I should learn when to shut up, shouldn't I.'

There was another mass of whorling clouds, then darkness peppered with stars. Benny swore, but the words were lost under the sound of the engines roaring louder and louder.

* * *

The clanging of their feet against the metal was echoing so much that Shell thought her head would cave in. Following the yellow line was like chasing a comet, an endless tail of light.

At last, they turned a corner and found the line seemed to vanish down a hole in the middle of the floor. Arko wrestled with the metal hatch-shield that shielded their goal – a tiny cushioned pod. Blue lights flashed in the circle of floor around it. 'We'll never all fit in there!' Forno squeaked.

'We'll have to,' Shell said, bundling Forno down into the pod and clambering on top of him. It was like trying to get into a biscuit tin. She could smell the must, and Forno's sweat, and the pungent smell of coolant coming from somewhere.

Squeezing herself tight against the cushioned walls, Shell realised with horror that with Arko's bulk in here as well there'd be no room even to move.

As if to prove her point, Arko lowered himself in on top of them both. Stiff-limbed, unable to move, Shell gasped as the hatch cover tried to slide back into position, pushing Arko's furry body against hers as it finally closed.

They clung to each other in silence as a second later the pod dropped out of the bottom of the *New Dawn*, freefalling down to the planet surface.

Renad, the Thane of Mahel's most trusted warrior, cursed his rumbling stomach for waking him. Worried about the level of his men's morale, he had divided his meagre share of the rough, salty bread ration between them. They'd taken the extra food without a good deal of comment, and his stomach, it seemed, was not about to forgive him for this wasted act of martyrdom.

Outside he could hear the clanking, droning rumble of the off-world machinery used by his men to dig out new pits and cover up old ones. Renad had approved their use for the task only reluctantly. Using alien machines instead of the old, trusted traditions did not sit well with him, but he'd been forced to accept that there was no longer room for tradition in these dark days.

He shifted his lithe, powerful body uncomfortably in the narrow bunk. Since his wife had been taken from him, he had taken to sleeping out here, unable to bear even the scant comforts of their family home. Instead, each night, he would awaken to the cool darkness of the perimeter shelter. Here he stayed, night after night, he and a handful of his best men, minding the pits and praying for deliverance, for a sign that the siege would soon be ended and that the new plague afflicting them would be burnt out of Venedel for ever.

Renad frowned. There was another note in the air, one that rose above the rumbling of the earth-movers. As if the sky itself were screaming in distress.

The door to his cabin was thrown open. Renad leapt out of bed as Nazan, his adjutant, fell to his knees in front of him, his young face clearly panic-stricken. 'It is the Gods!' he yelled, staring wildly around him as if expecting to find them here.

'They have found their temple defiled and swoop from the sky to destroy us!'

Without warning, a dazzling white light clung to the world around Renad, and with it came a sound like a dozen thunderclaps bundled together. The forest was lit up like it was day under a new, terrible sun. Nazan screamed. Then the light faded and the noise died away.

Renad tugged on Nazan's long, matted hair, dragging him up from his knees. 'What did you see?'

'Lights, screaming from the sky!' Nazan said. His eyes were so wide they seemed to fill his face.

'Our Gods of the Underworld would crawl from the depths, Nazan, they would not swoop from the sky.' Renad cuffed his young assistant round the face and quoted from his master. 'In the sky there are only the Federation who seek to destroy us, and the Nishtubi who bring us food -'

Renad broke off. The terrible noise from before, as if the air above

were metal being twisted apart by giant's fingers, seemed to be returning.

Nazan's eyes grew smaller as his mouth grew larger. 'The aliens seek to kill us all with their loud lights in the sky!'

'One of these "loud lights" has now fallen to the ground, Nazan,' Renad said thoughtfully. 'The other is sure to follow it. So let us go and find them, to learn what they are.'

Outside the perimeter shelter, the thinning night was still noisier, as if growling in anger at the approaching dawn.

Renad's calm words sounded hollow now as he remembered them. The forest seemed different to him, sly and unwelcoming somehow.

He and Nazan pushed warily into it.

The cockpit was a red blaze of heat and noise, and yet a patch of bright flickering orange far below caught Benny's attention.

'Fire from the Nishtubi ship, I think,' Starl gasped, veins like thick spaghetti pulsing in his temples. 'If they got down in one piece I'm damned if we won't.'

But Benny's attention was now taken by the treetops racing by below. They seemed sickeningly close, close enough to touch. A few seconds later, the ship was buffeted as they did so. 'This is it then,' Starl said, his blistered hands back on the steering column. 'With a good wind... and if the hull holds...'

Shaking and screaming, slamming and crashing a trail through the tall trees, the *New Dawn* finally crashed down into the planet surface. A tsunami of mud and debris roared out from the ground around the ship, as it ploughed through the soft swampland like a diving submarine slicing through clear saltwater.

Nazan nearly leapt out of his skin at the sound of the second incredible explosion. Like Renad, he threw himself to the soft forest floor and waited for the terrible vibrations to cease.

'A sky full of comets can mean only one thing,' Nazan whispered, his big eyes full of terror. 'Death, Renad, death is coming!'

'Death has been with us always, and closer now than ever,'

Renad said. But he knew, as Nazan knew, with the certainty of a lifetime's superstition, that the truth could not be good.

'Is everybody okay?'

Arko waited for some kind of response from his companions.

It had been rough as bloody hell, even with the built-in inertia generators, but the escape pod had finally come to rest after a cartwheeling flight over what felt like half of Venedel. He was alive; and uncomfortably aware that he was lying very heavily on Shell and

Forno.

‘Can’t shift...’ he muttered, groping blindly for some bare metal against the cushioned fabric. ‘Shell, Forno, are you all right? I’m trying... to open... this damned bloody door...’

Finally his paw gripped the release handle and he yanked down hard on it. With a depressurising hiss, the stubborn hatch of the escape pod opened reluctantly on to pale, tree-dappled sunlight. Sour-smelling air wafted in, and Arko’s sensitive nose twitched in revulsion.

‘I don’t know where we are, but it stinks,’ he reported, in case his friends could hear.

Then a tall, broad-chested figure came into view, silhouetted against the watery light. Its blue eyes shone through a fringe of coal-black dreadlocks in a face that was lumpy and rough, as if cheap leather had been stretched over badly-carved rock. As it peered dispassionately inside, the figure produced a large, heavy-looking gun and pointed it at Arko’s head.

The Waska sighed, and resumed his commentary. ‘It *really* stinks.’

Benny hardly dared think about what she must’ve just lived through. She suspected someone had stuck pudgy digits in her eyes and mouth and had been using her head for a bowling ball. She felt her neck gingerly. Since a line of bruises rather than stitches seemed to be holding neck and head together, she realised she’d have to hit on another theory.

The terrible screaming of the ship’s dying flight had ceased, that was something, as had the klaxons, the sickening vibration of metal trying to tear itself apart... but there was a pressure in her ears now, as though she were underwater. She tried to swallow to clear it but her tongue was dry and stuck to the roof of her mouth. She could feel a headache starting up a dull rhythm, mournful thuds like the idiot crash of tree after tree against the buckling hull of the *New Dawn*.

‘Welcome back, Benny. Rise and shine. Well, shine as much as you can covered in that stuff.’

That was Starl’s voice. He’d made it too.

Her eyes flickered open. Benny saw her hip flask hovering before her lips, and took a sip. The hot liquid bathed her dry mouth and her tongue pulled free. The flask and the hand that held it fell away, and there he was: bleeding from a cut above his eye, looking very wet and bedraggled, but otherwise apparently unharmed. He was even smiling.

‘Stuff?’ she croaked.

He gestured along the length of her sprawled-out body, and she saw she was covered in a thick brown sludge. Flies buzzed over her soiled clothes, and a toilet stench suddenly threatened to overpower her.

She tried not to gash. ‘What happened?’

‘We crashed into the swamp,’ said Starl. ‘You were knocked out. I got the anti-gravs to raise us up enough to break the surface, then hauled you across the marshes to dry land.’

Well...’ He slapped a hand against the scrubby ground, and it squelched. ‘Dryish.’

‘Thanks,’ she said simply. There didn’t seem a lot else she *could* say, and she felt awkward. ‘How come you’re so clean?’

‘I went swimming while you slept. There’s a clear stream not far from here. But I thought you might like to wash yourself rather than let me have a crack.’ He smiled again. ‘So to speak.’

‘With lines like that,’ Benny said, her eyes narrowing at the wound on his forehead. ‘I take it that’s *not* my doing?’

‘I cut it on the door frame as we started sinking again,’ Starl said hurriedly. ‘A kiss goodbye from my ship.’

Benny raised a sticky eyebrow. ‘Goodbye?’

Starl’s easy smile faltered. ‘She’s gone. The anti-gravs failed. She’s sitting at the bottom of the swamp.’

‘We’re trapped here, with no supplies or equipment?’

Benny’s headache shifted up a gear, a slow bossa nova now behind her eyes.

‘I saved your rucksack,’ Starl said, reaching behind him and tossing the lump of sodden fabric to her. She pulled it open and checked inside for Joseph. He was there, safe and sound.

‘What a result. We may be marooned here, but at least we’ll always know what time it is. Perfect.’ A guilty thought struck Benny. ‘I’m sorry. You’ve lost your ship, your whole livelihood.’

‘Well, that’ll sure teach me to drug turnips.’

Benny half-smiled. ‘Well. We’ve got to find my team. Find the temple. The Nishtubi archaeologists must have a fully functional ship here somewhere.’

‘So what, we ask them for a lift?’

‘Sure. In exchange for making Irving Braxiatel the Honorary President of their Archaeological Society, or something. Because I’m sure they’re excavating an ancient Argian war temple to establish their impeccable credentials.’ She scowled.

‘Wait here. I’m going to take a bath.’

The water was fresh and clear, and the air over the river smelt a whole lot better than the swamp. Benny just hoped there were no piranhas on Venedel, as her naked body bobbed in the water. She scrubbed at her blue sweater, rucksack and khaki trousers – abandoning her shirt, which was ripped and ruined – then bathed her cuts and bruises, revelling in feeling so cool and clean.

Glancing about to check she was alone, Benny splashed up on to the

far bank and pulled on her clothes and sandals.

‘Starl!’ she shouted across the tranquil water. For an uneasy moment she wondered what else might come looking at the sound of her call, but it was only the tall, familiar, black-jacketed figure that dutifully appeared.

She gestured to two fallen trees that spanned the river, forming a makeshift bridge. ‘Let’s go.’

He nodded. Benny set off at a leisurely pace, knowing he’d soon catch her up. Fronds of undergrowth tickled her legs as she took in the fresh sights, smells and sounds of this seemingly unspoiled world, looking for possible evidence of the pod’s landing. The *New Dawn*’s spectacular descent behind her was well documented in scorched vegetation and splintered tree-trunks, but what would be the tell-tale signs of an escape pod making planetfall...?

She was so absorbed that she failed to notice the ground falling suddenly away from her. With a yelp, Benny threw herself backwards, almost dropping her rucksack, the earth crumbling under her heels. When she propped herself up on to her elbows, she let out a moan of horror, scrabbling away from the edge of a huge pit, deep, square and open, and starting to bake in the sun.

It was full of charred, broken bodies, the blackened tatters of arms and legs pointing in a hundred directions, none of which had offered escape. The eyes and mouths, now scorched black and resigned to this, had been open and ghastly in their terror and despair.

Benny rolled over and screwed her eyes tightly shut, two thick handfuls of grass in the white-knuckle grip of her hands.

5 Hospitality

Arko trudged wearily on through the woodland in silence, weighed down with the unconscious bulk of Forno over his left shoulder and Shell's limp body – tucked as gently as was possible – under his right arm. Behind him the Nishtubi guard kept pace, the gun still pointing at his back.

With some relief, Arko felt Forno begin to wake, and heard a few fragile snorts from the back of the skinny Waska's throat.

He turned round to face the impassive guard.

'He's waking up. Good job too, I can't carry him much further. Give us a moment.'

The Nishtubi nodded and smiled coldly, his dreadlocks knocking about his ears, but his grip tightened on the gun as if in warning.

'Believe me, pal, after carrying this pair for so long I couldn't rush you if I wanted to.' He glowered at the guard once he'd manoeuvred Forno on to the forest floor, and muttered,

'Which I do, believe me.'

While Forno groaned weakly and rubbed his eyes, Arko looked worriedly down at Shell. He wiped dribble from her lips, and found the skin around them was sticky and wet. Her face was ashen save for a lurid patch of shiny red skin surrounding a large, dark bump at the top of her forehead, and she hadn't stirred once since their arrival. When he'd pulled her free, Arko realised she'd banged her head – and burnt it quite badly – on a patch of bare, hot metal in the pod, where the cushioning had peeled away. A coolant leak, probably. The pod was as rotten as everything else on Starl's stupid ship.

The Nishtubi had made Arko lay down his friends on the ground by the pod and then join them there while the guard conducted a body search. When the guard was happy that none of them were carrying weapons, Arko's long hike with living luggage had begun.

'Did we make it?' Forno asked weakly now, as though on his deathbed. Arko was a little more sceptical of Forno's injuries – he suspected the little skinny-ribs had only fainted with fright.

'Yes, we made it. Trouble is, so did the Nishtubi ship, and I think that's where we're being herded.'

Arko nodded behind him, and Forno started trembling at the sight of the huge guard with his equally huge gun. Arko conceded that in its militaristic two-piece uniform, as matt and as grey as its clay-like skin, the Nishtubi cut an imposing figure.

'What are they going to do to us?' Forno wondered.

That, thought Arko as he shrugged irritably, was a very good question.

Still at gunpoint, he and Forno carried Shell into the forest. A plume of smoke rising from above the trees ahead suggested they would not have far to go before they found out.

A little recovered, but no calmer, Benny couldn't stop staring at the grisly scene in the pit. There had to be a hundred bodies piled up in the blackened mud. 'Burnt,' she croaked, needlessly. 'All of them.'

'Burnt alive, too, by the look of them,' Starl muttered, placing a hand on Benny's shoulder. She shrugged it off and Starl retreated a step. 'Flame-throwers, I'd guess.'

Benny shut her eyes. 'The Federation should stop messing around and do something to really stop this. By cutting off food, they're probably making it easier to justify doing this to the population so the rations go further!'

'We don't know the rationale behind any of this,' Starl pointed out. 'Anyway, can you imagine how jumpy so many minor affiliated planets would get if it was felt the Federation could march in and occupy them at the first sign of a domestic dispute?'

Benny rounded on him. 'Domestic dispute? You make it sound like a row over whose turn it is to do the washing up!'

'They've got to play things carefully,' Starl said smoothly, undeterred. 'A few defections would suit the Fifth Axis very well.'

Benny narrowed her eyes. 'Finger on the pulse of the political scene, haven't you.'

'I've run cargo hauls to just about every federated world in the sector,' Starl said coolly. 'You pick up the way things are.'

'So what about the people caught up in the politics?' she asked him. 'Don't you care?'

'If you'd never come to Venedel and seen this,' Starl replied, 'would *you* care?'

Benny turned away and back to the pit. The bodies in there, wretched and broken, seemed to be asking her the same question. 'Maybe not,' she admitted. 'But I care now, okay? And I care that we find my friends very, very quickly. Because if these people can do something like that to their own kind, what are they going to do to off-worlders?'

Benny stormed off into the thick, crowding undergrowth, and Starl followed her.

'There you go, Shell... Nice and easy, girl.'

The Nishtubi camp had been speedily erected in the clearing around their wrecked spaceship, which protruded from thick mud at the end of an enormous furrow through the landscape.

Arko laid Shell gently down in the cool of a large makeshift tent, fashioned from a thick grey stretch of tarpaulin on a piece of dry

matting. He sniffed. The guard that had marched them all here had graciously allowed the unconscious Shell to be sheltered from the sun inside. Arko licked carefully and gently at her head wound with his long tongue to clean it.

Her eyelids flickered. He waited eagerly to see if they would open, but with a deep sigh she seemed to lapse straight back into unconsciousness. He noticed there were not only some pale pink blotches on her neck, like insect bites, but there was also a strange odour about her that Arko could not place, and he was concerned. He had never been this close to an injured human. In every sense.

He glanced up, suddenly uneasy. The tent already housed two Nishtubi dead, wrapped up tightly in burial shrouds on a table. Arko thought the bodies looked every bit as stiff and unnatural in death as they did in life.

He exchanged a miserable glance with Forno who stood squeamishly at the front of the tent. The guard was still covering them with a gun, and now he gestured them both outside. There was a guttural shout from the clearing, and what sounded like some half-hearted falling into line.

‘Oh, Arko,’ whispered Forno. ‘I don’t like the sound of that.’

‘Reckon the captain’s on deck,’ said Arko, and as he emerged into the clearing, prodded ahead by the gun of the Nishtubi guard, he saw he was right.

Five Nishtubi stood on parade, stock still as statues, as a figure still more massive than they marched stiffly down the line. He wore a rich brown uniform with what might’ve once been a white dress shirt; the collar had been torn away, presumably to prevent it chafing against a nasty gash on his neck. Apart from his size and this more splendid uniform, the leader could also be distinguished from his men by his lack of hair. His head was like a pitted boulder.

Ignoring his men, the leader marched up to Arko and Forno.

He looked at them sternly.

‘I am General Maddaska.’ The stiff, stern face cracked into a smile that appeared in no way friendly. ‘I am currently responsible for the distribution of aid relief to the people of Venedel.’

‘You’re aid workers?’ Forno said, quietly and hopefully. ‘We thought you were soldiers.’

‘Mercenaries,’ Arko said, not bothering to disguise the sneer in his voice.

Maddaska seemed to consider him thoughtfully. ‘We are soldiers,’ he said.

‘Are we your prisoners?’ Forno breathed.

‘We have no jurisdiction here on Venedel,’ Maddaska said, raising his voice for a reason Arko couldn’t comprehend, and turning away.

Arko felt a surge of anger and pointed accusingly at his guard. 'Well, I wish you'd told him that! He acted like he owned the bloody place.'

Maddaska turned back to face him, his voice still unnaturally loud. 'We act in the interests of our native hosts,' he said with a grandeur that was at odds with his sly smile. There is no danger, Chieftain Renad. You may emerge.'

Arko appreciated now for whose benefit the general had been talking. A human, tall and gaunt, his hairless skin tanned dark by the sun, emerged from the jagged hole scored in the side of the crashed Nishtubi ship and came closer. Beside him was a younger man, smaller and skinnier with staring eyes.

'You found these beasts in the forest?' Renad asked suspiciously.

'Beasts?' Arko glared at him. There was a strange look on the man's face, and of that of his staring companion. Humans were so hard to read sometimes.

'They escaped from an alien ship,' Maddaska said. They tried to take the food we bring you for themselves.'

'You're lying!' protested Forno. 'We come peacefully, just as you do!'

'What food, what are you talking about?' Arko said irritably.

Then he followed Renad's gaze and saw that what he'd assumed were singed, dirty sandbags piled against the ship, were actually full of grain or something similar. Aid relief, of course.

'We thought you would wish to question them,' Maddaska added.

Renad seemed a little taken back. Then he licked his lips, eyeing Arko's paunch. 'We do not ask questions of beasts.'

Suddenly, Arko realised what the humans' expression signalled.

'We kill them for food.'

Forno gripped Arko's arm in terror. Arko bared his teeth. 'You want to watch your tongue, boy.'

Maddaska cuffed him with the back of his hand, and Arko staggered backwards, tearing free of Forno's grip. It was like he'd been smashed by a half-brick, and he found himself leaning heavily against the flimsy wall of the tent, senseless.

'Tonight we will feast in your honour,' he heard Renad tell Maddaska. The meat from these animals will go well with the supplies you bring. You must bring your people from the temple to join us.'

'There's no need the general began.

'Your people will come,' Renad insisted heavily.

'That is gracious of you, Chieftain,' Maddaska said, his voice betraying what he *really* felt of Renad's offer. 'We should be fascinated to see you put our gifts of food to... good use.'

A shiver went through Arko.

Then something brushed against his ankle. He saw Shell was crouched at his feet looking urgently up at him. Her face was still pale against the livid red weal on her head, but her hazel eyes burned brightly.

‘We have to run,’ she mouthed at him.

Arko stared down at her, in an agony of indecision. It was down to him to make the diversion. Now, while they thought he was still dazed. How close was Forno? Would Shell have the strength to run far? The Nishtubi were armed.

Then Shell tapped something against his leg. A gun. Looking up, he saw two holes had been torn in the sides of the two Nishtubi corpses’ burial shrouds, where the weapons had been manhandled through. ‘Clever,’ he mimed to Shell. Soldiers, Maddaska had said. Buried with full kit.

He pretended to collapse to his knees, and slid his sweaty paws round the gun. He’d never used a weapon before in his life. Shell seemed to have been considering the same thing as she looked down nervously at her own gun.

‘First time for everything,’ she whispered.

‘Only time, I hope,’ Arko mouthed back, getting back up to his feet.

They had a chance. He saw from Shell’s sudden smile that she thought so too.

He took a deep, deep breath.

‘Well, well.’

Benny’s heart caught at the excitement in his voice, and she turned. A crushing sense of hopelessness had been starting to smother her – the forest seemed to go on forever, and she felt sure that at any moment she’d find herself teetering on the brink of another death pit. But Starl’s simple exclamation changed all that. He was at the top of a verdant slope, peering at something through a curtain of vegetation hanging down from twisted branches above.

‘You’ve found them?’ she asked, running to join him.

‘Not Arko and co,’ he replied distantly. ‘That other thing you were looking for.’

Benny pushed him aside to see for herself – and found herself letting out a low whistle of appreciation.

Only a few hundred metres away, wreathed in mist, like it was in a scene from some corny holovid, was the Argian Temple of the Gods of the Underworld.

‘All we need is the dramatic music,’ Starl noted.

‘All we need is Arko, Shell and Forno and we can do what we came here to do,’ Benny corrected him.

The temple facade was enormous, angular and alien. Benny had

seen its basic type before but never so well-preserved – the whole thing could have been built yesterday. She'd never seen one so... *flashy* either, so extravagant. Bright columns of stone rose up from the temple roof like swanky chimneys, topped with bizarrely sculpted abstract designs. The yellow stone seemed to glitter in the sunlight, as if encrusted with gems, though based on the rock formations she'd seen so far, Benny imagined that was more likely to be an effect of mixing the sandstone with shattered quartz than anything else. Squinting into the sunlight, Benny could discern hieroglyphs and strange line-drawn scenes standing out prominently up and down the fluted frames that flanked the blackness of the open doors.

Currently, only the temple entrance was visible, protruding from a giant mud bank. The hillside that had buried it for generations was now half-demolished, ripped wide open, its secret out. Exposed tree roots spilt through the earth like giant worms, crowding around the huge temple doors as if seeking shade in the cold, dark rectangle that led inside.

Benny realised that while she'd been staring, Starl had been scouting around. 'No one around,' he reported.

'The Nishtubi probably aren't out of bed yet,' Benny replied caustically. 'It must only be lunchtime after all.'

'Shall we get a little closer?' Starl suggested.

Benny considered, although she knew she couldn't resist. 'It's possible Arko and the others are inside already, looking about.'

'What about the Nishtubi archaeologists?' Starl said reasonably.

'No such animals,' Benny huffed. 'Come on.'

'What about the Gods of the Underworld, then?' Starl yelled after her. 'Won't we disturb them?'

'We'll tiptoe, stupid,' Benny called back.

She led the way, scrambling down the steep slope towards the temple that was steaming in the sunlight, tempting as a freshly-served dish.

Arko yelled at the top of his lungs as he span round, bringing the gun to bear on General Maddaska and Renad, causing Forno to leap about a mile in the air. Shell followed him out of the tent.

'No one move,' Arko ordered. 'Or I'll kill your general.' He glowered at Renad and his boggle-eyed companion. 'And his hungry friends too.'

No one said anything, although Maddaska's look was eloquence itself.

'Throw down your guns,' Shell said shakily. 'Please.'

At a nod from Maddaska, the guards did so. He took a step forward, ignoring Arko's gun.

'You have defiled our dead,' he said slowly.

'I'll defile your living too, pal,' Arko assured him. 'I've got no shame. Have I, Shell?' No answer. 'Shell?'

'I'm sorry,' she muttered, swaying unsteadily.

'Forno, help her,' Arko snapped. 'She's not well.'

Maddaska tilted his head to one side. 'Precisely. She is not well, and you are dead. I can't see any of you getting very far.'

'Which way is the Argian temple?' Shell asked, leaning on Forno for support.

'Quarter of a mile that way.' Maddaska pointed north-westerly and smiled. 'Please do visit, I have men working there who'll be delighted to welcome you. If you can make it that far, of course.'

'We'll make it,' Arko said, glancing worriedly at Shell. 'Now, you lot are going to take a nice walk in the forest, away from us. All right?'

'They'll just circle round and kill us!' Forno whispered.

'Shut up and get the first-aid box,' Arko told him, gesturing first to a grey casket outside the tent. He raised his voice. 'You leave us alone, we'll leave you alone. There's no need for a fight, okay?'

'These are the Thane's sacred grounds,' Renad said, his low voice trembling. 'Beasts have no rights in our land.' He looked at Shell. 'And nor do the dead.'

'Shut it.' Arko blasted the ground in front of Renad, struggling to hide his reaction to the hefty kickback on the weapon. A pile of mud and leaves erupted into the air before him, but to Arko's disappointment, the boy barely flinched.

'Just turn around and start walking.'

Reluctantly, the Nishtubi guards began to do as they were told.

Maddaska smiled at him lopsidedly before he turned himself.

'We'll meet again. Very soon.'

'Then you'd better hope I'm not holding this,' Arko said, baring his teeth and waving the rifle. 'Goodbye, General.'

Renad glared at Arko with a terrible hunger, then he and his friend turned away as well.

Arko fell back a few paces. 'Shell, are you all right, girl?'

'That native, Renad. He said I was dead. Why did he say that?'

'Trying to scare you,' Arko said.

'No,' said Shell, her eyes still distant, 'there was something about the way he looked at me...'

Arko didn't comment, staring coldly after the retreating figures of the General, his men and the two natives. Only when they had vanished from view completely did he allow himself to start shaking. Forno looked at him, his black eyes wide and full of curiosity, pushing a collection of tubes and lotions, even a torch, into his pockets.

'Arko? Are you -'

‘Come on,’ Arko said gruffly, and led them away into the forest.

‘Be still,’ Renad whispered fiercely.

General Maddaska held up a hand to his men, who dutifully halted. Renad screwed up his eyes in concentration, straining to hear the faintest sound of movement. He smiled grimly as it came; nothing subtle after all, just a mighty crashing through the forest as the three aliens ran away.

‘Nazan,’ Renad ordered, ‘return to the settlement. Tell the Thane what has occurred, and raise a party of men.’

‘To go after the... aliens?’ Maddaska enquired.

‘To transport the supplies back to our people,’ Renad said, raising an eyebrow in surprise. ‘Tell them to be wary, Nazan. The forest is not yet clean.’

Nazan nodded fearfully.

‘We shall pursue these clumsy off-worlders. Go, Nazan.’

Maddaska’s great grey face split open in a smile as the warrior boy hurried away. ‘What will you do, Chieftain Renad?’

‘Avenge our humiliation.’ Renad stared into the empty jungle as the sounds of movement receded. ‘The beasts we shall roast and eat.’

‘And the female?’

‘A foolish question, General Maddaska.’ Renad turned to him. ‘She must burn.’

6 The Temple of Gloom

Benny gazed up at the temple, a thrill shivering down her spine. 'This is the stuff,' she muttered to herself. There was an odd smell in the air, sickly and cloying, as if a pile of marzipan fruits was going off somewhere in the sun. Nishtubi BO, she supposed.

'Nice pictures,' Starl commented, gesturing at the nearest wall which was busy with pictograms.

'I imagine they depict the Gods of the Underworld,' Benny said, taking them in herself.

'What big eyes they have.'

'Shell could tell you all about that, it's her specialist subject,'

Benny said thoughtfully. 'I imagine they're all the better to see you with.'

'These things tell a story,' Starl noted.

Benny nodded. 'Some sort of mythical history.'

'So in this first one,' Starl said, peering at the figures, 'the gods are all happy in their various corners of hell.'

'Who wouldn't be,' Benny said, nodding in agreement before moving on to the next image. 'And here one is growing bigger and badder than all the others.'

'The little devil,' Starl mused. 'Or rather, not.'

Benny scowled at him. 'He's making the others bow down to him in this one...'

Starl moved on to the next picture. 'And then they all have a big scrap and...'

'And that's all folks.' The temple wall vanished into the hillside. Benny started walking back towards the entrance.

'They haven't excavated any further, I'm happy to say.'

'Happy?' Starl echoed. 'We're just getting to the good bit.'

'No,' Benny said, looking up with a thrill of anticipation at the intricate carving of the temple portico. '*This* is the good bit...'

She idly rubbed a thumb against the ancient brickwork, then stopped and pulled her hand away. Her thumb tip was covered in a black, oily deposit. Aghast, she held it out to Starl for inspection.

'Looks like soot,' he said.

'It is soot.' Benny wiped it against her top. 'Those idiots must've *blasted* their way into the hillside!'

'That's bad, is it?' Starl said vaguely, looking curiously at the temple.

'Of course it's bad,' Benny spluttered. 'They could've blown the whole temple to smithereens. Think about it, this ancient rock lying here undisturbed for thousands of years, then this bunch come along

and –'

'Maybe the Venedelans did it.' He shrugged at her filthy look.

'I mean, they had to discover the temple somehow, didn't they? Maybe it was found during ground levelling or something.'

'Always ready to play devil's advocate aren't you,' she said, suddenly incensed by his endlessly easy-going attitude to life.

'Nothing's ever anyone's fault, is it?'

'I'm not saying that. I just think it's dangerous to leap to conclusions about people when you don't know all the facts.'

He smiled. 'Take me for instance.'

'I know all I want to about you, thanks,' Benny rejoined.

'My point entirely,' Starl said, holding up his hands in acquiescence. 'Pre-judged.'

'For your information,' Benny stormed, 'the residue on the temple walls is sticky, oily. Therefore it is recent.' She wiped a finger along it, then trailed it down his leather coat. 'The residue was formed in a doubtless barely-controlled detonation of pistolwax, probably the most volatile and dangerous blasting explosive you can get your hands on. It's so dangerous it's been banned for decades, and I can't imagine your precious Earthlink Federation handing it out to a developing planet. I dare say the Nishtubi have their own black market supply of the stuff. Cheap, and nasty, and...'

Her voice trailed off as she caught a glimpse of something else in the temple wall, like a seam of some glistening deposit in the weathered rock. She crouched, examining it intently. 'It looks like there's some kind of modern sealing compound in this stone.'

'How modern?' Starl didn't seem impressed. 'The Argians weren't exactly backward, were they? I mean they had space travel, why would they use just rocks and mortar to keep their best silver in?'

'It's just not the Argians' style,' she said, quite happy to lecture him. 'They were big on myth. Heavily into bounteous nature and supernature, they wouldn't defile a sacred temple carved from the living rock with chemical polymers. And besides, this sealant's not ancient, I'd swear to it. The rock beneath is old, and genuine I'm sure... But from the evidence here, and here,' she said, pointing out the offending patches,

'it's almost like a facade has been built up around the original...'

Starl looked confused. 'You mean this place is a fake?'

Benny hefted her backpack on to her shoulder, and shivered.

'I don't know what I mean. Not yet.' She considered the forbidding, black, echoing entrance before her, and nodded grimly. 'Come on,' she said, taking a step inside the temple, her voice sounding small and dead in the cold, sickly-smelling darkness. 'We'd better take a look inside.' She paused. 'Of course, if this was a professional dig there

would be lanterns all the way along here at all times.'

'Perhaps they take them down at night to -'

'They do *not*. Be on my side here, okay? Or shut up.'

Starl paused. 'A shame our torches are all at the bottom of the swamp,' he said quietly.

Benny nodded, conceding that point, but guessed the gesture was wasted even these few steps forward into the thick blackness. 'We'd better link hands.'

She was pleased he didn't make some sarcastic comment-but more pleased, she realised with some surprise, at the feel of his warm, rough hand in her own. Gingerly, step after tentative step, they moved on into the dark.

* * *

Shell was finding the haphazard journey through the forest hard going.

'Keep moving!' Arko shouted, piling through the dense vegetation. They'll be right behind us, you can bet on it.'

Forno panted on beside him. 'We don't even know that General was pointing the right way.'

'We're totally lost anyway,' Shell said. 'This is our best option.' Then, as a wave of dizziness crashed over her, she came to a stop and leaned against a tree. 'I'm sorry, I have to rest.' She pressed tenderly at the burning skin around her head wound, wincing as she did so.

'Does it hurt when you touch it?' Arko said softly.

'Yes.'

He smiled sympathetically. 'Then don't touch it.'

'I think it's infected,' she said.

'Your neck's looking redder too,' Arko noted. 'Forno, any antiseptic lotion in there?'

Forno squeezed a thick glob of white paste on to his paw and held it out to Shell. Arko swiftly swept the blob away from him and applied it to Shell himself. She smiled.

'Bit of a wreck, aren't I?' She smoothed away her long hair from her face. It was tangled, full of knots, and trapped her fingers. Angrily she pulled them free. Her head was starting to throb, and there was a terrible taste in the back of her throat.

'We'd better get going, hadn't we.'

Arko nodded and looked round for Forno, who had probed a little further into the jungle.

'What are these?' he called.

Shell stumbled forward, following Arko over. Forno was standing at the edge of a clearing. Three large plots of land were being cultivated, large square patches of dark brown mud fixed to the untidy forest

floor. Weeds were starting to push through, but it was clear the land had been dug up only recently.

‘I’ll tell you what they are,’ said Arko. ‘Look there.’

Shell crouched down and looked more closely at a pile of pebbles on the mud in front of her. Then she gasped.

They were fingertips, blackened and crushed between two great clods of soil.

‘Someone’s buried here,’ she whispered.

‘Quite a few someones, I’d say.’ Arko turned away in disgust – and his eyes widened in alarm. ‘Look out!’

Shell turned just in time to see the great grey hand lashing out towards her. She rolled aside and kicked out at General Maddaska’s legs, gasping as her ankle twisted under the impact – it was like striking solid rock.

Arko brought his gun up and fired at Renad, who was pouncing towards Forno. He missed, and a tree crackled and burst into flame. Forno went down as Renad attacked, holding a knife to the Waska’s throat, but then Shell couldn’t see any more as her stomach suddenly twisted in agony and she pulled up her legs into the foetal position, gasping for breath.

She could hear Arko shouting, and more gunfire, but all she could see was Maddaska towering above her. Then he crouched by her side and took her hand, almost tenderly, his glittering blue eyes watching over her like an attentive father’s.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ Benny whispered.

Starl came to a grateful halt behind her. She pulled her hand free and his fingers soon became cold. It felt foolish to be afraid of the dark, but there was something about the atmosphere in this place. Cold and almost sweet-smelling, as if the walls were strewn with dying irises. Benny was doubtless used to this kind of thing, a veteran of a thousand tombs and temples. But Starl couldn’t think of many places further removed from his usual haunts.

She really was something, this professor, he decided.

Nothing seemed to keep her down for long, but there was...

something there in her eyes that spoke of a need for hustle and bustle at all times, of a craving for problems to solve and messes to clear up to divert herself from the deep down dark things inside. Everyone found their own way of dealing with that stuff, he guessed.

‘Come *on*, Joseph,’ Benny muttered. She was rummaging in her rucksack.

‘Who the hell have you got in there?’ Starl hissed.

‘My name is Joseph.’ Starl jumped as the nasal voice floated from out of the pitch blackness. ‘The intelligent organisational assistant of

Professor Bernice Summerfield.'

'He thinks he's clever,' Benny added.

Starl began to introduce himself in turn, but Benny's sniggers stopped him.

'He's a white ball,' she said. 'He's not interested.'

'Ah.' Starl folded his arms, wondering how to take this. 'So why have you brought him out to play, tired of my company?'

Benny tutted. 'Joseph, are you equipped with infra-red visual circuits or something?'

Joseph cleared his throat. 'My visual systems are programmed to function in a variety of light levels –'

'Can you see in the dark?' Benny asked a little more directly.

Joseph was silent for a while. 'To do so will drain my energy banks over a prolonged period –'

'Lead the way, Joseph,' Benny said, ignoring her little sphere's protests. 'Slowly does it. Let us know the minute you notice anything unusual about this passage, or if there are any life forms ahead, all right?'

'Define unusual,' Joseph requested.

'Anything that's not rock or sand. Loose objects. Tripwires and booby-traps. That sort of thing. Oh, and move at an altitude just a little higher than Mr Stanmore's head.' He felt her fingers brush his hand. 'We'll let Joseph bang his head on the inevitable hidden ledge first, shall we?'

Arko swore as his shot went wide. Running to where Forno lay struggling under Renad's attack, Arko kicked out hard. Renad tumbled backwards towards the burning tree, then shouted out, slapping his hands against the back of his head, which was smoking.

'His hair's caught fire,' Arko told Forno with glee. 'Quick, get up, while he's busy.'

'What about Shell?' Forno yelled.

Looking up from Shell's body, Maddaska unleashed an energy bolt in their direction. Arko threw himself to the ground and rolled over and over across the uneven mud of the mass grave. Another tree sparked into flame, and now a thick smoke rolled across the graves, shielding Shell and Maddaska from his view. A high-pitched choking told him Forno was nearby, and he looked wildly around him for a bearing, eyes bulging as he held his breath.

'I'm here,' Forno coughed. 'Come on!'

Arko shook his head as he slithered to his feet. 'We can't leave Shell!'

Another blast of energy shot past, almost taking his nose off.

'They've got her, we can't help her for now,' Forno said. Yet another

blast searing past his head told Arko it was true.

‘We’ll come back for you, Shell,’ he yelled, giving away his position. Two more blasts thumped into the ground at his feet.

‘That’s a promise!’

Almost blind in the smoke, he and Forno sprinted for the far side of the clearing.

‘The passage veers to the left,’ Joseph announced, now sounding as if he were thoroughly enjoying asserting his superior night vision. ‘It also narrows considerably.’

Benny felt her hips brush the passage walls. ‘So it does,’ she muttered, and breathed in, turning sideways. At least the sickly, decaying smell seemed less strong now. ‘Bit of a squeeze here, Starl.’

‘Is that an invitation?’

Benny groaned at the poor line – then froze, halfway through the gap. She blinked several times.

‘Joseph, what’s that?’

‘What is what?’

There was a soft glowing shape in the middle of the passage.

‘There is nothing ahead of us,’ Joseph said. ‘The passage is empty.’

‘Benny?’ Starl’s whisper was close in her ear.

‘Look!’ she hissed back at him, her heart started beating faster. ‘Joseph, what is it?’

A figure was forming, diluting the light around it with its own darkness, a shadowy presence growing larger and larger, towering above them in the gloomy chamber.

‘There is nothing ahead of us,’ said Joseph.

‘Back to me, Joseph! Back to the sack, move it.’

Joseph was clearly pained. ‘There is *nothing* ahead of us,’ he insisted, wobbling back to her with bad grace. But behind him, the shadowy shape was forming burning red eyes and a large, toothy maw. Benny jumped as Starl’s hand clamped down on her shoulder.

‘A trick? A trap? Now this is unusual for an Argian temple,’ she said. ‘Unless this really is a tomb full of treasure...’ She shook her head. ‘It must be a hologram of some kind... Joseph can’t see it because he’s a computer.’

‘Or because it’s an evil spirit!’ Starl shouted. ‘They may not be able to drag personal organisers back down to hell with them, but...’

The apparition started to speak in a deep, thundering monotone. The short hairs spiked up on the back of Benny’s neck. The words were gibberish, thick and guttural in an alien tongue. Like a spell or something.

Starl’s voice seemed to have risen an octave. ‘See what I mean?’

‘Point taken,’ she decided, slithering frantically back through the

narrow gap. 'Run!'

With the incantation rising in both volume and fury, Benny chased after Starl blindly through the darkness, stumbling against the cold, rough walls, scraping her skin, stinging her outstretched palms as they slapped against the rock. The blackness was as unyielding as the questions that stabbed at her. Surely they couldn't have taken a wrong turning? Without Joseph leading the way and choosing the route... What if this was the real trap, a hologram to tip the intruder into just such a panic, to lead him to a real danger lurking deep in the bowels of the temple...

But then Benny saw a shaft of what looked like daylight ahead, spilling from behind a bend in the rock. Rounding the final corner she cannoned into Starl with a gasp. Her eyes flinched from the sunlight. He'd come to a dead halt, the idiot, and...

And all around them were Nishtubi with guns. Tall, grey malevolent golems in uniform and dreadlocks. The guns were pointing at Benny and Starl in a moment.

'You see, that's where you've been going wrong on this dig,'

Benny said, getting her breath back. 'The gun is rarely used as a tool in archaeological excavations, it's considered a little clumsy. Spoil yourselves – get a trowel or something.'

The blue eyes in the grey faces were unblinking, and unamused. Benny wondered if their jaws would crack off if they ever attempted to laugh. She noticed too that while the Nishtubi definitely had a whiff about them, it was a dry, earthy smell, nothing like the strange cloying scent in the tunnels.

'You are supposed to keep this place under watch at all times.'

At the sound of the deeper voice the Nishtubi that were gathered around them stood to stiff attention. An even taller, broader Nishtubi, his head either shaved or bald, pushed through their ranks. He was clearly their leader.

'You're invited to a feast, boys,' the new arrival said.

'Courtesy of Chieftain Renad here.'

The Nishtubi gestured to a deeply tanned man with thick dark hair that had been hacked into a very curious style, then lightly singed. He was dragging someone along behind him, a woman, his big hand wrapped around her skinny white wrist.

He let her fall to the ground.

'Shell!' Benny breathed, and crouched down to look at her.

She looked hopefully into the older woman's blue eyes, and Shell managed a weak smile in return. There was a nasty cut on her head, and her neck was thick with a dark red rash, like someone had tried to garrote her with stinging nettles.

'So... You are friends of the girl and her two beasts,' the Nishtubi

leader pronounced. He smiled at Benny. 'You are our prisoners. Are there any more of you?'

'No. And even if there was, it makes no difference,' Benny snapped. 'My name is Professor Bernice Summerfield. I'm heading an independent archaeological survey team and you have no jurisdiction over us. We have diplomatic immunity.'

She glanced around contemptuously at the big guns pointing at her, refusing to be intimidated.

The Nishtubi leader strode closer. 'I am General Maddaska,' he said smoothly, his dark blue eyes unblinking, a look of faint amusement on his lumpy face. His breath was faint and cloying on Benny's skin. 'And I'm sure you have no kind of immunity whatsoever.'

7 In the Cells

Arko and Forno watched helplessly from the cover of some spindly bushes as Benny, Starl and Shell were led away by the Nishtubi. Maddaska had words with two of his men, presumably to tell them they weren't going to the feast after all and to watch out for two furry main courses doing a runner.

'What do we do now?' Forno asked nervously.

Arko scowled. 'How should I know?' He resented being seen as the decision-maker here. It wasn't his style at all.

Tense, silent minutes shuffled past.

'I wish we'd never come,' Forno said sadly. His big black eyes scanned the structure before them. Then he considered. 'Mind you, that temple really is remarkable, isn't it? Look at those architraves...'

'Maybe later, eh?' Arko hissed, looking down at the two Nishtubi guards remaining. 'We've got to get rid of those two guards for starters.' He looked at the gun, and shook it. 'The others should've moved off far enough by now... and I think I've worked out how to set this thing to stun.'

'But have you worked out how to aim it?' Forno asked innocently.

Arko abruptly rose and unleashed a noisy volley of shots down at the two guards, blanketing the entire area in bright charges of energy. The Nishtubi guards panicked, blundering about until one or two of the shots eventually found their mark and they collapsed, unconscious.

Arko grinned cheerfully down at his friend. 'No,' he admitted.

Benny walked impatiently through the unending forest, herded along at gunpoint. Starl was carrying Shell in his arms, since she was now too weak to walk, burning up with fever and clutching her stomach.

'Is this something specific she's picked up on Venedel,' Starl wondered, 'or are we all going to come down with it?'

'Well?' Benny asked Renad. 'Do you know what's wrong with her? Can you help her?'

Renad turned to face her briefly. 'There is no help for her. Be silent.'

Sod that, thought Benny. 'It's a lovely temple you've found here,' she said, trying a different tack. 'Particularly like the demon. Nice touch.'

'Demon?' Renad asked suspiciously, glancing over at Maddaska.

'Didn't he tell you?' Benny asked innocently. 'It was one of the ancient gods by the look of things, just like in the old stories. Funny how no one's ever seen one for real until now.

And such an uncanny likeness. Almost as if it had modelled itself on

the visual depictions you'd find on latter Argian temples.' She tutted. 'Although to be honest we didn't stick around for introductions.'

'You well know, Renad, from your own *frequent* visits, that our study of the temple has yielded practically nothing,'

Maddaska said patiently, falling into step beside Renad. 'The alien lies.'

'Aliens do little else,' Renad muttered darkly. 'You promise us treasures with which to barter a peace with the Federation and yet you deliver only trinkets.'

Benny's ears pricked up. 'Trinkets? Artefacts from the temple? Those could be priceless!'

'Unfortunately, yes,' Maddaska agreed sadly.

Benny was about to question him on that particular comment when Renad spoke first.

'And what can goods with no price buy us from aliens?' he said bitterly.

'The treasures will come,' Maddaska said. 'And in the meantime we bring you food and supplies.'

'He's tricking you, you idiot!' Starl shouted, and was clouted round the head by a rifle butt for his trouble. Benny helped steady him as Shell squirmed in his arms.

'The Nishtubi alone are our friends,' Renad said, but with no real feeling, as if reciting something by rote, perhaps words of wisdom from his thane. Benny shook her head in disbelief. It made her sick to her stomach to see Maddaska smiling so smugly.

'What do you propose to do about the two other aliens?' the Nishtubi general went on, smoothly changing the subject.

'They are merely beasts with stolen guns,' Renad said contemptuously. 'We have many hunting pits dug out in the forest to trap what few wild animals remain. I will raise men from the settlement to see if they are caught already. If not, we shall hunt them down.'

'Hunt...?' Now it was Starl's turn to speak out. 'They're not animals, you can't just —'

Maddaska gave a short laugh. 'The people of Venedel are hungry, human. Be thankful their appetite does not yet extend to your own soft, pink flesh.'

Starl remained silent, a clever comeback seemingly eluding him. He remained lost in thought for some time. Then he turned to Benny. 'In the temple... you think that image was a fake?'

'Don't you?' Benny nodded to herself. 'It's like someone took a holoprint of a latter Argian pictogram and fiddled about with it a bit to make it scarier.'

'Well, if it *was* a fake, how come you ran so fast?'

‘Just because it wasn’t a real demon doesn’t mean it couldn’t kill us,’ Benny pointed out. She turned to Shell. ‘Where *are* Arko and Forno?’ she whispered, smoothing back a long matted lock of hair from the girl’s sticky red forehead.

‘I don’t know. We were separated,’ Shell croaked through cracked lips. ‘I couldn’t go on. My stomach. Something’s wrong.’

Benny shushed her. ‘It’s okay. Look... We’re off to meet whoever’s in charge here. I’ll make sure you get some proper medical attention.’

Shell nodded weakly, but didn’t seem convinced. Benny couldn’t really blame her. She didn’t even believe herself.

‘Stay here, Forno.’

They were the words Forno had been dying to hear, but he managed to keep his face neutral for Arko’s inspection.

‘Those guards should be asleep for hours,’ Arko went on.

‘And they’re pretty well hidden under all that foliage back there. But if they do wake up, give them some again.’ He threw Forno the rifle.

Forno nodded, but he was already fussing over the scar in the temple wall, lamenting the amateurish work done on its excavation. ‘I’m going to get some preliminary work done on the stratigraphy of this place. If there’s sealant in the rock, we have to know what the successive soil levels show about the occupation of this temple land. I don’t think this is a fake, but there’s something not right...’

He glanced away from the scars in the rock to find Arko was looking at him meaningfully.

‘Oh, and I’ll watch over the guards too,’ Forno added sheepishly. ‘Honest.’

Benny and Starl stood before two large doors made out of a bamboo-like substance.

‘The decor’s a bit rough for a palace, isn’t it?’ Starl whispered. ‘Or is it just trendily retro – you know, tastefully done out in about a million years BC?’

‘Opulence means different things to different cultures,’

Benny began, before realising she was doing Starl’s usual trick of being contrary for the sake of it. She sighed. ‘You’re right though, it’s crappy, isn’t it? Except for the relics, of course.’

‘You’re sure they’re genuine?’

Benny huffed. ‘I shan’t take offence at that entirely unnecessary comment.’ She pointed to the small collection of coins, beads and goblets scattered on a low occasional table.

‘What Brax wouldn’t give to get his hands on those...’

‘You should pocket them.’

Benny held out a palm containing two worn coins and a large bright

bead, and smiled briefly as she returned them to her tunic pocket. 'Oh, I couldn't possibly.'

'Criminal. Not that I imagine they'll care if Maddaska's convinced them it's all rubbish anyway...'

Benny drifted off, not listening, trying to think clearly now.

Maddaska and his men had been taken away to enjoy whatever luxuries the palace compound had to offer. The unconscious Shell, Renad had said, would be kept with 'the others infected'. Benny hoped that meant she was at least receiving some medical attention. And she and Starl had been granted an audience with the Thane of Mahel himself, who was clearly enjoying making them wait in this nasty little room.

But if this settlement was typical of Venedel, it was clear the planet must rank as one of the poorest in this sector. It smelt like a farmyard. Tired, scrawny chicken-like poultry in the yard outside, waiting for inevitable slaughter, pecked disconsolately against the log walls of the settlement as if still harbouring some stubborn hope of escape. But lacking even the fowls' spirit, men and women went soullessly about their business in the village square like zombies, their minds consumed by the fierce hunger that was wasting their bodies.

When a group of natives had burst in on the wretched scene with sacks of Nishtubi grain, the mood had changed. Another consignment had made it through the blockade. The general and his men were feted as heroes. There would be a feast this evening, enough food to stave off despair for just a little longer.

Coming back to the present, Benny looked around her again.

She supposed she should find it refreshing in a way that the palace looked so dowdy. On so many worlds the rulers lived in grandeur while their people lived on nothing but fresh air. On this evidence, the Thane had no such pretensions. Perhaps she could make him see reason. But again and again, the hideous image of the burning pit came into her mind. How could you reason with anyone capable of that?

Abruptly the doors swung open, and a small fanfare started up. Benny and Starl took a cautious step into the throne room.

'His majestic highness, the Thane of Mahel!' a lackey proclaimed over the continuing fanfare, waving a spear in their direction. 'All kneel, all kneel!'

Starl knelt with exaggerated fervour, and Benny followed suit, discreetly taking in their surroundings. In a word: grim.

The floor was paved with well-worn flagstones. Faded crimson wall-hangings sagged over the walls, and a crude carving of what appeared to be a large dog breathing fire at a funny-looking lizard scored the ivory ceiling. A gaggle of court attendants knelt dutifully, and behind

them was an orchestra of four seemingly doing its best to slaughter a sprightly regal melody.

Ahead of them, a single throne of burnished bronze sat upon a stone dais ringed with burly guards. The throne's occupant had the look of someone eternally pained by the world about him – little wonder if he had to endure the indefatigable court musicians and their dreary droning on a regular basis. A four-spired crown was settled on his mop of black curly hair and he had to possess the galaxy's biggest 'tache. What looked like an ermine stole was draped regally about his scrawny neck, and the collars of his spotless white shirt looked long and sharp enough to draw blood from his pot belly if he slouched down any further in his seat.

The music stopped. To Benny's horror, she realised Starl was trying to stifle giggles. This had not gone unnoticed by the figure squatting on his haunches beside the throne: a little man with thick glasses and the oppressed air of a beleaguered chief librarian.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured as Benny stared daggers. 'I don't do sombre very well.'

The Thane cleared his throat languidly. 'I see Renad spoke the truth. You are *aliens*.'

At the very word, a low murmur of alarm passed like a drowsy insect across the scandalised members of court.

The Thane paused to allow the noise to die. 'Aliens are no longer tolerated here on Venedel.'

'We come in peace,' Benny said, wobbling a little in her kneeling position. Then she noticed that the little man beside the Thane had started to scribble furiously as if taking dictation.

'Is this an interview?'

The little man seemed enormously pleased to have been observed at his task. 'Since the Dark Days, when Argia burnt all knowledge, the task of writing and recording each nuance of our history has been entrusted only to the select few.'

'Each nuance since the temple was built?'

'Our noble Thane's forefathers reclaimed this land only five hundred years ago, we had no idea of the temple's existence...'

He trailed off, the look on the Thane's face implying that the select few who recorded history were about to become a still more exclusive group if he didn't shut up.

'You claim to have arrived with the second falling star...' the Thane wondered aloud, before checking himself. 'Spaceship! I meant spaceship. Don't write that down, Hoodath,' he added to his attendant scribbler. 'You did not simply arrive from nowhere like the others?'

'Others?' Starl asked, his face straight now. 'You mean the Nishtubi?'

‘No,’ said the Thane as if Starl was a child.

Benny was puzzled. ‘We crash landed here in a spaceship like you say, just as the Nishtubi did. The Federation opened fire on us. Tried to kill us. One of our party is unwell as a result, we ask that you help –’

‘Help?’ The Thane rose to his feet in anger. ‘I have granted you audience for one reason only: to see with my own eyes the enemies hiding in our skies.’

Benny got up from her aching knee. ‘I told you, ours is an archaeological mission –’

‘Enough. Take them to the cells,’ the Thane said, turning his back on them with a camp twirl.

‘You have to listen to us!’ Benny shouted desperately as she and Starl were bundled away.

But the Thane, it seemed, had plenty in common with other royalty after all, despite his dowdy palace. He didn’t have to listen to anyone.

* * *

Arko shifted his bulk uncomfortably against the gnarled branches up in the top of the tree, and sniffed mournfully at the smells of home cooking wafting over the walls of the settlement. He hadn’t eaten for what felt like forever.

It also seemed at least that long since he’d had any inkling of what to do next.

From his vantage point up here, he’d seen Benny and Starl rushed out by a group of very angry guards a while ago, and taken to some kind of lock up, ringed by a wooden stockade crowned with wreaths of barbed wire. There was no sign of Shell.

The roar of heavy machinery drew Arko’s attention back to a large, deep pit that was being dug out by a bunch of sweating natives off to the east of the settlement, beside what looked to be some kind of workman’s hut. He remembered the great square graves where he’d lost Shell, and shuddered. At one point, a couple of Nishtubi had wandered out there to watch.

Morbid fascination, he supposed, like himself.

Meanwhile, of course, dinner was cooking, so presumably the hunt for him and Forno would be intensifying. All told, it wasn’t the ideal situation. And he felt he was the person least equipped to deal with it. Apart from Forno, of course.

Typical.

Benny kicked the wall of her cell as hard as she could. Then she hobbled back across the cell and rested her head against the partition wall separating Starl and herself.

‘Starl?’ Are you all right?’

His voice was muffled. ‘Easy come, easy go.’

‘If only.’ Benny looked mournfully at the metal door so incongruous against the thick, dark wood that held it. She could see marks in the wood where ancient hinges had once been fixed; the metal door, thick and scored with scratches and spots of rust, was presumably a demonstration of the Federation’s munificence. She’d glimpsed a storehouse outside packed with old robots, grotty looking flyers, scraps of machinery... the cast-offs and hand-me-downs of a dozen more prosperous races, a taste of the high-life Venedel could afford if it only kept up Earthlink membership. And now the Federation were in the doghouse, so too were their beads and necklaces; except these bloody doors, of course.

A thought occurred to Benny.

‘Starl,’ she called, low and urgent, unsure if there were guards eavesdropping outside. ‘What did you make of the locks on those doors?’

A pause. Then: ‘Hefty.’

Benny tutted. ‘I mean, what type do you think they are? They looked like they might have time-releases on. Probably salvaged from bank vaults or something.’

‘Maybe. So?’

Benny smiled and squeezed her rucksack. ‘So I have a little white ball that’s a dab hand at resetting chronometers.’

Starl’s reply was too muffled to hear but it sounded quite colourful.

‘Say again?’

‘The lock’s on the outside of the door, Benny. Even if you’re right, how can Joseph get to it?’

Benny banged her head against the wall. As she did so, a terrible wailing started up from Starl’s cell, soon followed by some manic banging on the wall.

‘Starl?’ she called. It was like he was having some kind of fit.

She called his name again, louder. Over the row she caught an ominous hissing click. The door to Starl’s cell had opened.

There was a gunshot and the noises stopped dead.

‘Starl!’ Benny shouted. The sudden silence felt deafening.

Then suddenly a quiet bleeping came from the door to her own cell. Benny hid behind the door. While she held her breath, the door seemed to exhale as the pressure seal broke and the door clicked noisily open.

A guard stepped into the room. Benny pounced from behind the door, grabbed his arm and swung him round. With a satisfying crunch he hit the far wall headfirst and collapsed backwards.

She spun round for the exit only to find her way was blocked.

By Starl.

'If I hadn't just knocked out that guard myself, that move would've seemed even more impressive,' Starl said, with a knowing smirk on his face.

Benny grinned despite his smugness. 'I can't believe any self-respecting guard would fall for the old "I'm not well, unlock the door so I can overpower you and escape routine"!'

'They've not been with the Feds long, remember? Haven't seen as many holovids as us.' He pretended to mop his brow and gave an exaggerated whistle of relief, then gestured to the open door. 'Anyway, at least Joseph can get to work on that lock now, right.'

Benny slapped her thigh with mock-jollity, walked over to join him in the doorway and then kned the somewhat smug Starl in the groin.

Recovering consciousness felt to Shell like she was pulling her way out of a thick black bag. So many times she simply wanted to give up, to stay where she was, insensate in the blackness.

But a part of her was insisting that she hold on, that she mustn't die. That after her easy, cloistered life she had the spirit to survive, and that getting out of the bag would be proof of that.

Once she'd done so, her eyes finally opening and staying open, she knew she'd done the wrong thing.

She was in some poky, filthy hut, packed with up to fifty people moaning in pain or distress. A child beside her started screaming with tears, his face mottled with some kind of erubescence and scratched raw. A man, knees bunched up to support his festering chin, knocked the child away with a savage sweep of his hand. No one seemed to care. Wild eyes in every face flickered about as if unable to decide which picture of pain to settle on, rocking and moaning, locked into their own private suffering.

For a time, Shell absorbed this dully, as if slowly taking in an equation that made no sense to her. But after a time, through careless cracks in the bamboo walls, chinks of setting sunlight began to turn the hellish scene blood red. Then Shell realised with a hot, sick feeling that she'd been too late getting out of the bag. That she must be dead already.

'It's getting faster and faster,' an old woman behind her muttered. 'Faster and faster. They'll come for us soon. Used to take days, but now...'

The wailing and the screaming went on. How had this happened to her? Shell closed her eyes, fought to stay calm, to concentrate and to blank the scene out, but the darkness she'd fought so hard against wouldn't come for her again.

Forno had been unable to find any useful tools about the Nishtubi

camp, and so was waist down in the mud beyond the temple's exterior wall, burrowing happily away, making a trench for himself.

He felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of the others, all at the front line on this world while he stayed out of things. But then, wasn't he doing what they had come here to do?

Suppressing such thoughts, Forno allowed himself to be drawn into his task, studying the strata in the soil, deriving the stratigraphy of the temple site. It was impossible to be precise without the proper facilities but certain things were clear. For a start, the sealant in the rock gave away the fact that someone had enhanced the temple facade, but this new evidence in the foundations suggested the work had not been purely cosmetic.

Some pretty fundamental structural changes had been made here, and comparatively recently. He reckoned the original temple to be about six thousand years old. The enhancements couldn't be much older than a few hundred. But if the temple had been discovered back then and worked on, why did no one know of it until so recently?

The sun was going down. Forno remembered the guards. He should check on them. Perhaps he could even ask them to share their own theories, should they actually have any. Then his nose twitched. A waft of sickly-sweet, almost rancid scent was carried to him on a warm breeze, and made him feel suddenly queasy.

Then he jumped as he heard a low babble of angry noise, like an enormous stomach rumbling. His long ears pricked up. The guards must be awake! They were buried up to their necks and hidden under plants, but what if they'd got free? The smell got stronger, and Forno could hear heavy footfalls. The guards weren't *that* big. What was happening?

Forno tried not to shake, gripping the gun as tightly as he could. With dread, he knew he would have to go and investigate. There were storms of butterflies in his stomach, but if he did nothing, a Nishtubi laser bolt would doubtless set them free.

Clods of soil slipped from his fur as he crept round to the temple entrance – that strange stink was so much stronger there – and peered round the corner to the escarpment where they'd hidden the guards.

They hadn't moved.

Forno twittered and retreated back to the temple entrance.

Then his heart seemed to stop beating as he noticed what looked to be a single, huge footprint in a patch of the freshly burrowed mud that had shaken loose from his fur. With a squeak of alarm, Forno decided that the bottom of his trench would be the safest place to be, and he ran for it.

8 Outbreak/Break Out

‘Oh, wonderful. That’s all we need.’

‘I doubt that,’ Starl said. He had taken her lovetap with affected macho indifference, but he was clearly still a little sore and sore-tempered, peering with exaggerated concentration at the prison corridor ahead for any sign of further guards while Benny rummaged for anything useful in the stockpile of junk filling the cell opposite.

So far, the only thing of note she’d found was some kind of rusting knackered telex, lying on its side amidst a pile of other mechanical bits and pieces. Clearly, this was another makeshift storehouse for technological trinkets, dumped here when the Federation had dumped on Venedel. But this particular device was still spewing out reams of official looking paper covered in black type.

She tore off a lengthy strip and rustled it at Starl to get his attention. ‘This seems to be receiving transmissions from Earthlink Central.’

‘What does it say?’

‘It doesn’t seem to say anything, it’s too busy shouting,’

Benny answered. ‘I don’t think the Thane’s been taking their calls. They’ve insisted he participate in some kind of tribunal and he hasn’t, spy satellites show he’s still committing atrocities against his people... Why can’t they just land in force and sort him out?’

‘I told you, in domestic disputes... Enforcing sanctions is heavy-handed enough in itself.’

‘Well, it looks like they’re getting heavier.’ She scanned down the most recent communiques. ‘The other kingdoms of Venedel are backing the Thane up. No one will allow the Federation access. They’ve got arsier and arsier, presented him with ultimatums...’ She trailed off. ‘Uh-oh.’

‘What is it?’

‘They’re holding a referendum on what action should be taken. Result due imminently.’

‘Possible outcome?’

‘A nuclear strike against the kingdom of Mahel,’ Benny said.

‘That’s us, right?’

Starl looked at her. ‘Not for much longer, it would seem.’

‘Shh. Listen.’ Instead of dramatic music right on cue, Benny could hear some jolly, brassy, warbling melody starting up in the distance, and the rising sound of talking and music and determined carousing was unmistakable.

‘Their feast must’ve started,’ Starl said shortly.

Benny nodded. ‘At least that makes it less likely this place will be

heavily guarded. No one would be excluded from this feast, would they?’

‘Bad for morale,’ Starl agreed. ‘Let’s just hope no one misses our hapless guard and comes looking.’

Together, they moved stealthily along the corridor. Soon, Benny could hear another noise, one much closer: a muffled thumping and a woman’s voice, coming from ahead. She glanced at Starl and saw he’d heard it too.

‘Shell!’ she breathed, and ignoring Starl’s warning for caution ran on up the corridor.

It was coming from another cell. ‘Shell? Shell, is that you?’

Starl rushed up beside her. ‘It could be a trick.’

‘What, our sleeping guard taking revenge by locking himself inside and tricking us into letting him out in the same way?’

But she had to admit, the noise had stopped.

Suddenly a man’s voice spoke from the adjoining cell. ‘Who’s there? What’s happening?’

‘Who are you?’ Starl challenged, suddenly authoritative.

The voice suggested someone middle-aged and portly. ‘My name is Administrator Dex Tinhar of the Earthlink civil service.’

‘What’s going on?’ the woman’s voice came again. Benny’s heart sank. This voice was low, husky, quite sexy. It wasn’t Shell’s. ‘We heard the noise, thought maybe there was fighting, a Federation incursion...?’

‘Unlucky,’ Benny answered. They’re having a slap-up feed courtesy of the Nishtubi.’

There was a pause. ‘My name’s Han Krista. Freelance journalist. Who are you?’

‘Benny Summerfield.’

Tinhar piped up, ‘Can you get us out of here?’

‘Please,’ added Han. ‘I have to get my story to my editor.’

‘Story? You’re writing about the burnings?’

‘Yes.’ Han sounded like she was losing patience. ‘About what’s really going on here.’

‘That’s a tale I’d like to hear myself.’ Benny looked at Starl.

‘Safety in numbers?’

‘Has to be better than standing here talking to a pair of walls,’ Starl conceded. ‘Trouble is, there’s a security code which I had to get the guard to input before the doors would open. I don’t know what it is.’

‘Then maybe,’ Benny said, scrutinising the keypad, ‘we can trip the circuit on to time release and use Joseph to do his stuff after all.’ She grinned at his blushes. ‘Unless you have a better idea, of course.’

Half-buried under silt and soil, Forno lay as still as he could in the

bottom of the trench, his long ears at full stretch and twitching at the slightest sound.

His nose began to twitch too. With a feeling of utter doom, he smelt that same sickly scent as he had when checking on the guards. There were the footsteps again, too, heavy and regular. Something big was coming, and the stench was overpowering now. Forno shuffled his body deeper into the ground. It must be just around the corner of the temple, now, but would it look his way...?

He could barely contain a shout of alarm when he heard the approaching thing, whatever it was, actually start speaking. At first, Forno thought he'd been spotted at once, but he could just make out the mosquito hum of another voice, carried presumably over a communicator.

'Something big happen here,' came the voice, low and gravelly, modulated in some way. Tremors, systems damage... I no know what cause it, but is sure we needing to move here. We needing to knock this baby in the head.'

Forno frowned to hear such eccentric speech coming from what was doubtlessly a scary monster of some kind.

'Always you saying more time, Maddaska. You an amateur. Your men, they fail to guard. They not here, not doing their job... Prob'ly off smokin', drinkin'... Anyone could be being here, you not know about it.'

Forno held his breath.

'And that not all. I been monitored the Fed'ration blockade,' the voice went on. 'It just got worsened. They brought in the big guns and we all go to burn if Fed'ration planets agreeing on it... I knowing you say "soon", always you saying "soon". We need this babies now... Need the second mutations so we starting work. You get me?'

Forno shook his head silently as the voice, and the large feet, moved away from the temple entrance. He hadn't understood much of the bizarre conversation, but the situation wasn't sounding good.

Arko. Arko would know what to do.

Forno would just wait here a while, out of sight, and hope Arko came back.

Maddaska pushed his communicator back into his tunic pocket and rejoined his table, deep in thought. Ukka and Antrin, both missing? They knew better than to wander off on duty. Perhaps Renad's beasts were to blame... But even if the animals *were* snooping, what could they do now, with no means of escape and with the Federation surely poised to blast anything leaving the planet into smithereens...? This was Maddaska's third time on the planet. He had suspected his luck running the blockade couldn't hold, but the last laugh would still be

his...

Spying his return, a battered serving droid approached him with tireless enthusiasm. Maddaska declined a portion of flat, doughy bread served up on a battered steel platter, ordering the droid to present it to the Venedelans instead. He had not touched a thing himself; like his men, he preferred simply to observe the spectacle around him. While he waited.

The meeting hall was packed with tables crowded with dishes and crowing people. Everyone in the settlement seemed to be in attendance. Even the servants were allowed to sit at table, while the droids were brought out of their enforced retirement for the occasion. The wine was flowing freely – a rough, acrid-tasting drink that the general refused to partake of, even from politeness.

A few seats from Maddaska, Renad was sitting, moodily chewing on the gristle from a chicken bone, doubtless wishing it was a rib from the beast his men had so singularly failed to capture in the forest. Some of them came to him now, lamenting the absence of one of their number who was still loyally guarding the new alien visitors. Renad's eyes narrowed, and he rose without another word.

Maddaska watched him cross the busy room, clearly intent on informing his master. The Thane, sitting with his ridiculous little scribe on the top table, had been throwing icy glances Maddaska's way at first for refusing such glorious Venedelan hospitality, but after a flagon or two he seemed to have relaxed considerably. Right now he was smiling benevolently at the small orchestra and ritual dancers, pretending to conduct them with a chicken drumstick.

Renad, as ever, was clearly not wasting his words. The Thane listened, then waved him away, with some irritation, towards the exit. Two of his troubled guards followed him, and the scribe, flushed and merry, started writing again with great flourishes of his quill pen.

A slow smile spread across Maddaska's face as he sat back and surveyed the carnival about him. The atmosphere seemed lighter still now the ever-thoughtful Renad had departed. Food was devoured with relish, the wine swilled back like water. The hall was ringing with laughter, relief and happiness.

The poor fools, thought Maddaska.

Joseph had done his bit and now Benny and Starl had faces to put to the voices of their fellow prisoners.

Benny's mental image of Tinhar hadn't been far off. He seemed in his late-forties, a jowly-looking character with thinning hair neatly combed across his shiny scalp. Indeed, despite his incarceration, his appearance was near impeccable: his pale pink shirt seemed surprisingly clean, and his three-piece black suit was barely crumpled.

He looked as if he'd just emerged from a shuttle lounge rather than a dusty cell.

Apparently, he'd been dispatched to Venedel to account for the cost of all equipment bestowed upon the planet, at the first rumours of Venedel's ceding – and had been taken hostage the second the siege had begun. Clearly, he was a very tidy-minded administrator, with a slightly officious air that Benny imagined could soon get irritating. She considered for a moment locking him back up again.

Han, however, was almost as sexy as her husky voice had suggested. She was oriental looking, with brown almond eyes and black hair. Her cheeks were slightly chubby, but judging from her curvy body, perhaps it was puppy fat. The girl couldn't be far into her twenties.

Nevertheless, it seemed she'd seen a lot more of life than many of her peers. As they moved cautiously along the corridors in search of an exit from the stockade that was less obvious than the front door, Han spoke quite casually of the horrors she'd seen. She seemed to possess a professional calmness, as if she'd already transfigured her reactions to the whole hideous affair into headlines and standfirsts.

It seemed some terrible blight was sweeping across Venedel, some kind of killer infection. There was no possible treatment, apparently, although Renad claimed to have purified the forests, and the death pits, where the bodies of the dead were incinerated, were scattered all over Mahel to ensure the forests stayed clear. The Thane referred to this as a new judgement from the Dark Days, an ancient curse revisited upon Venedel, and he had tried to suppress all knowledge of the outbreak.

'That's why he tried to withdraw from the Federation?'

'Partly. Then it got out that he wasn't just burning the bodies of the dead, but of the living,' Han said. 'In the Dark Days, burning the dead sufficed. But in some way, the nature of the plague has changed...'

'...And so the living had better watch out, too.' Benny felt sick to her stomach to think that, even now, Shell could be packed into one of those hellholes waiting to burn.

She peeped round a corner to check the way ahead was clear, then beckoned to the others to follow her.

'But basically this burning is a purification thing,' Starl queried, 'to try to stop this... "infection" spreading? Well, if there is no cure, perhaps it's the best way...'

'Starl!' Benny rounded on him. 'Of course there's a cure for it, whatever it is. The Thane's just too proud and backward to ask for help in finding one. If he's incinerating the sick...' Benny shuddered. 'He should jump in the pit himself.'

Starl shrugged. 'Where does the infection come from?'

Han glanced at Tinhar. 'No one's willing to discuss it. I was clearly

asking too many questions, ‘cos they put me away here the second the sanctions began. Never mind the fact I’m independent, non-Federation and could give them some fantastic press, the chance to tell their side of the story.’

‘They don’t exactly have the most enlightened views on aliens, do they,’ Benny agreed sourly. ‘Especially if they’re hanging out with the Nishtubi – those monsters are conning them out of every treasure going in that temple.’

Han raised an eyebrow. ‘You’ve seen the temple, then?’

‘Mmm, magnificent, isn’t it?’ Benny said quickly. But Han and Tinhar didn’t seem to share her enthusiasm.

‘The Nishtubi are keeping the people alive,’ Starl pointed out. ‘You can’t ignore that.’

‘There’s more to it than just charity,’ Han said. ‘You can depend on it.’

Benny turned to her, curious to hear more.

And saw a Venedelan guard round the corner behind them, a sword clutched tightly in his hand.

‘Run!’ she yelled. But of course, first the others had to waste valuable moments looking behind them to see what they were running from, by which time the man with the madly-chopping sword was almost upon them. And by which time she herself had lost ground because she had turned to see if they were following her.

So she changed tack at a turn in the corridor, dodged past the terrified Tinhar and ran *towards* the guard, grabbing his sword arm with both hands and kicking him where it hurt before he could use it. With a roar, the guard fell to the floor, incapacitated.

Starl was looking at her with a mixture of astonishment and admiration.

‘Aren’t you glad I practised on you, now?’ she said, smiling.

He grinned. Everyone was smiling at her with thankful relief.

Their heroine.

So only Benny saw Renad round the corner and rush up behind them. Before she could yell out, he’d knocked Starl around the head with the end of his spear.

Another guard appeared from behind Renad.

‘Resist capture and you shall die,’ Renad said.

That was the downside of Venedel not having been exposed to that many holovids, Benny decided with a shiver. Its people could threaten in butch clichés without any sense of irony.

Forno was still tucked away in his trench, watching the stars come out one by one to support the twinkling lights of Federation ships and mines, when he heard the singing.

It came in stark contrast to the gritty, gargling voice of the creature that Forno had hidden from before. Light and lilting, the melody sparkled in sympathy with the star-filled sky, and was entirely unpunctuated by sinister, heavy footfalls.

Forno cautiously shook his limbs free from the dry earth and got to his feet. The singing was getting louder. Peeping above the parapet, he blinked in astonishment at the music maker.

A humanoid woman, naked save for a diaphanous sheet of fine gauze, was tripping down the earthy path from the Temple of the Gods of the Underworld. Her eyes were wide and dreamy, and her smile was wide and inane. Her whole demeanour suggested that she wasn't heading off into dense forest in the middle of the night at all; she was setting out on some private, magical, mystical journey all her own.

Forno climbed out and followed her, quite astonished, a little way. Then he watched her vanish, still singing, into the foliage.

As he was walking back, utterly baffled, Forno suddenly froze.

This was ridiculous. Now, a low, sinister abrasive noise was dragging itself out of the temple.

It was the singing's antithesis. Forno looked longingly at the trench, but to get to it he'd have to cross the temple path and might meet whatever was coming so stealthily and nastily out of the cold darkness. He knew he should probably hide and observe whatever it was, learn as much as he could about it, discover its intentions. It could even supply him with some of the answers to the temple's riddles.

Knowing all that didn't stop him running into the night in the opposite direction.

Arko was sick of waiting. He shinned down the tree and made his way over to an area behind the stockade which seemed, from above, like a good place to burrow through. Flexing his claws he began to work.

It wasn't long before he'd gouged out enough mud and sand to wriggle through the gap – just in time to see Benny, Starl, and some other pair he'd never seen before being marched away over to the main hall by Renad and two guards.

And still no sign of Shell.

Arko kept to the shadows round the stockade building, watching as the doors opened, Benny and Starl went inside, and the sounds of celebration abruptly ceased.

'Party poopers,' Arko muttered, and sprinted across the courtyard to try to find out what was happening.

You didn't need feminine intuition, Benny decided, to work out that the Thane was not impressed by their attempted jail break.

‘Aliens,’ he cried, collars flapping about as he fair shook with anger. ‘They are dedicated to our misery!’ His shouting quietened the hall, which seemed packed with murderous-looking drunks.

Someone in the crowd threw a huge hunk of twisted metal, which landed at Benny’s feet. It seemed to be the remains of some kind of droid. She smiled weakly. ‘I’m sorry if we’ve given you all indigestion.’

Tinhar looked at her appalled, while Han and Starl stayed stoically silent. The Thane thundered on, and Hoodath wrote down every word, most likely now in capitals. ‘They block our skies, attempt to turn neighbours against us... Now they seek to keep us from what little meat and happiness we can still enjoy.’

‘If you’d just free us,’ Benny snapped, electing herself spokeswoman, ‘we won’t detain you a moment longer, I assure you.’

‘Oh, but you shall,’ said the Thane, standing up with the exaggerated flamboyance of a drunken man, his crown askance on his black curls. ‘By displeasing me, you have brought your deaths forward. You shall be our fools. Our entertainment.’ He clapped his hands. ‘Aliens will no longer be tolerated to live on Venedel.’

‘But you can’t kill me!’ Tinhar shouted, appalled. ‘I’m a good hostage!’

‘Renad, is the new pit prepared?’

‘It is, my lord,’ Renad answered quietly.

Benny’s heart seemed to freeze over at the Thane’s next command, and at the look of grim satisfaction on Renad’s face.

‘Take them there. Let them burn.’

Arko lost his appetite in a stroke, crouched eavesdropping behind the wooden door to the main hall. At the Thane’s command, he sprinted off back to the stockade, desperate to get to cover before the first of this drunken bunch swayed through the door.

The pit must surely be that enormous grave he’d seen the Venedelans digging to the east of the settlement. He had to do something. Get there first and... and do what, he asked himself bitterly? Fill it in?

The door from the main hall banged open, and Arko saw Benny and the others swept through it by the mob, held aloft and bobbing on the angry sea of villagers. Renad led the charge, waving a burning torch before him and brightening the night. Some effete little man with a moustache, clearly important, was carried out on some kind of sedan chair behind them all with various attendant lackeys. And behind them came the Nishtubi, with General Maddaska leading his men in solemn procession.

Arko slunk back into the shadows. He looked at the hole he’d

tunnelled through. Useless. He'd waited too long, left rescue too late. He closed his eyes but he could still hear the angry roar of the seething villagers.

He was too late to save any of his friends.

'You're pulling me apart!' Han screamed at the crowd, barely audible over their own clamouring.

'Let me down,' Tinhar moaned, his remaining hair plastered over his plump face. 'Let me down, please!'

Benny looked around wildly for Starl, and saw him swept into view beside her, his eyes closed and mouth tightly shut.

Benny marvelled at the sheer power of the whipped-up crowd as hands alternately bruised, grabbed and threw her, and the dark forest spun and swung all around.

It was mad, the ease with which this mob had been assembled. The bruisers back on Pan Leica were the type who looked actively for a fight, they hadn't surprised her, but here there were half-starved women and children joining in, the whole settlement acting as one. The anger and frustration they'd been dealing with for weeks, muted by the feast, had been brought bitterly back into the villagers' minds.

The hands went on clutching and squeezing at her. Han was still screaming, and Tinhar sounded like he was crying. Benny's shock was beginning to turn to panic, when the baying mob drew up alongside a filthy shack and, almost as one, seemed to recoil from it. Guards appeared and roughly directed them away from it. Benny craned her neck to keep the hut in sight, knowing intuitively that something ghastly was going to happen, but unable to tear her eyes away.

The crowd fell silent as the guards opened the door to the shack. Out of the blackness within spilled a horde of shabby human spectres, their clothes filthy and flesh livid red by the torchlight, a steady stream of the sick, the infirm, the dying, stumbling forward.

One by one, at spear point, they were tipped in to the pit.

Benny screamed in fury as she saw Renad hefting a flame-thrower, its oily muzzle dripping as he passed it to one of the guards. Soon he was passing along another. And another.

The spectre at our feast, this plague of Venedel takes many forms!' the Thane proclaimed. 'As we burn it out, let these aliens burn with it.'

Benny heard Han scream louder. Her nightmare was complete when she saw Shell stagger out of the shack, hunched up like an old woman, to stand teetering on the edge of the pit. A jabbing spear prodded her over and she fell.

'No! Shell, look out!' Benny struggled to free herself from the writhing hands of the crowd, desperate to reach the pit herself.

For a moment she thought she was making it.

Then she realised the crowd were simply throwing her in after her friend.

With a shriek, Benny was flying through the air. She landed heavily on a half-naked body, winded. She scrambled away, panic and confusion all around her, and made for Shell, whose rash-red face was smeared with mud from her fall into the pit.

‘Shell!’ she threw her arms round the woman, who stared at her in confusion, her breathing fast and shallow. ‘Are you all right?’

Shell just kept staring back at her with unseeing eyes that had seemed so lovely back on the *New Dawn*.

The human landslide continued, as person after person was forced inside, ever faster. Now Tinhar joined the flow, falling headfirst to cheers and jeers from the crowd above. Benny called to him as he scrambled up and stared around in wide-eyed terror. He staggered over.

‘This is Shell,’ Benny told him. ‘Take her over there away from the falling people and look after her.’

Tinhar recoiled. ‘But she’s sick, look at her –’

‘Do *it*!’ Benny snapped, and made her way as lightly as she could to the far side of the pit. Not weak and ill like the others, perhaps she could climb free.

‘Hurry them in!’ an urgent voice called, Renad’s probably.

‘The hatching time grows less and less. We must be quick.’

‘Thane!’ Benny yelled. ‘Listen to me! This is wrong, it’s evil. Think about what you’re doing! Stop it, please!’

Hatching time?

The Thane stepped forwards, his face dispassionate, his voice icily calm, playing to his crowd. ‘In the last plagues, over a thousand years ago, Venedel was weakened to the point of ruin in pursuit of basic survival. The people paid – and how they paid. They had no choice... Now the plague is upon us again, worse than ever, feasting swiftly on the living instead of lingering on in the dead...’

Hoodath was writing down every word with loving care, and Benny wished she could read the speech back; there was something in the Thane’s choice of words, she felt she was missing something...

Renad came into sight too, the barrel of his flame-thrower swinging down to cover her though he was looking imploringly at the Thane. ‘We must begin, my lord. Give the signal, before it is too late.’

Hatching time?

‘Venedel will never be made to pay again,’ the Thane swore.

A plaintive, gurgling scream, so powerful that it rose above the already deafening din, tore Benny’s attention back to those inside the pit. A young man was writhing in the mud, tearing at his chest, raking

his nails through ragged clothes to the bloodied skin beneath. People tried weakly to get away from him but bodies were falling like rain now.

‘Benny!’

Starl’s voice. He was pressed with his back flat against the wall in the far corner, cradling Shell in his arms while Tinhar was trying and failing to scale the sheer muddy wall to freedom.

‘Benny, get away from there!’

‘Begin, Renad!’ roared the Thane, though Benny heard him only distantly.

She watched transfixed as the blistered flesh of the struggling man’s chest began to swell outwards and turn black.

Suddenly his screaming stopped, and only a frothing noise could be heard as his throat bulged and his mouth twitched open, was *held* open, by something –

Benny gagged. Something was pulling itself out of the man’s mouth in a thick slurry of blood and bile. Its head was hooded, like a cobra’s – no, the creature was too short to be a snake. It was more like a lizard, its body like a thick, scaly rosebush branch covered in wicked thorns, its sharp claws shredding the man’s lips. It paused, newborn, slit eyes staring round blindly at this new world while the body it had grown inside still twitched and shook.

Hatching. One of those things is inside Shell.

Benny backed away as the creature’s eyes narrowed still further, looking straight at her. It bared needle teeth.

‘Benny, over here!’ Starl shouted. Benny saw another of the snake-like monsters was ripping its way out through the neck of an old woman. Han was trampling over hunched and shaking bodies to get to Starl, and freedom.

Renad swore. ‘The flame-throwers!’ Benny looked up, panic-stricken. But no fire was bursting from the dark greasy eyes trained on the creature. ‘They’re useless!’

Benny saw General Maddaska came into view beside Renad.

His blue eyes sparkled down at her.

And he winked.

The creature tore itself free from the flapping mouth of its host, and launched itself at Benny’s throat.

9 Landfill Sight

Benny dived aside as the creature pounced. As she scrambled back to her feet, she glimpsed the creature jumping and scraping at the mud bank as if trying to get clear.

It was ignoring her for now. Disorientated maybe.

More of the filthy things seemed to be bursting bloodily free of their human hosts, jumping feverishly a few inches in the air.

Pressure roared up in Benny's ears as her sense of the carnage about her seemed to dwindle, her body concentrating simply on getting the hell out of there. She saw Starl and Han and Shell grouped together, and bundled through the confused and the dying to get to them. Tinhar was beside Han, banging his fists in frustration against the mud walls.

Looking back behind her, Benny could see Maddaska by the pit edge, impassive like a statue standing in among the screaming, terrified crowds.

'We must bury them!' Renad shouted, and turned desperately to the earth-shifting machinery that had helped dig out the pit.

'It's our only chance to contain them!'

'Very well,' the Thane said, needlessly since Renad was already scrambling into the shiny black seat of the digger. The crowd of villagers had finally begun to flee in terror, and several of Renad's guards seemed to have joined them. Hoodath hopped and jumped in a frenzy of fear, but lingered with his master. The Nishtubi watched on stonily, apparently unmoved.

In front of them were a dozen or so infected villagers who had collapsed by the side of the pit, forgotten now by the horrified guards but too sick to escape.

Renad saw an old friend of his dead wife's family among them, looking at him beseechingly.

He looked away.

'Cast the last of them in,' he ordered his remaining men, staring hard at the gory panic in the pit as more Ilijah ripped their way clear of the bodies that had housed them. Reminding himself of what had to be done, whatever the cost.

Renad pressed a button and the machine roared into life, like a metal animal. He moved it round to the huge pile of earth beside the pit.

'General Maddaska!' the Thane screamed suddenly. 'What are you doing?'

Renad looked up and scowled in disbelief. 'No! No, you mustn't!'

The Nishtubi had scooped up two or three of the infected villagers and were running away with them into the night.

Their huge grey forms were quickly lost in the forest's shadows.

'Go after them!' Renad yelled to two of his men. 'Get those people back! Kill the aliens if you have to.'

General Maddaska turned at this, unsheathed his rifle and shot both Renad's men in the back. They fell with a shared scream to the forest floor.

'Duplicitous alien!' the Thane yelled, marching up to Maddaska, railing at him though he barely came up to the Nishtubi's chest. 'Whatever you may think, you cannot save those people. They will die, and many more will die with them when –'

General Maddaska casually swatted the Thane aside, as if the Third Monarch of Venedel was nothing more than a servant that had displeased him, and pulled out a communicator.

'Rendezvous at the ship. Three hours,' he said simply. Then he strode without another word or backward glance into the night.

'The mud pile, Renad,' Hoodath bellowed, throwing down his pen and gesturing like a maniac to a mad scrawl on his page. "'We must bury them", remember? "It's the only way to contain them!" You said so, you said so!'

Benny had more or less given up trying to follow the rough gist of the exchange on the borders of the pit. It seemed unlikely that she or anyone else would live long enough to make sense of the situation. Burning to death was apparently no longer an option, but between becoming a snake-lizard's dinner or being buried alive...

'How's Shell doing?' Benny asked, though she knew the question was futile.

'How do you think?' Starl said grimly. 'Look, Benny, if I give you a bunk up, can you reach the pit edge?'

Benny took a deep breath and placed her filthy sandal into the cradle of his hands.

'No!' shouted Tinhar, pulling her back. 'No, me first, please!'

Benny screamed as she fell backwards, landing on something with a disgusting squelching noise. She saw beside her a writhing mass of spiky flesh and glistening teeth trying to free its barbed body from a tear in a boy's neck, clawing at the near-molten flesh in frustration. She felt sick to her stomach.

More screaming about her died off as a huge shower of earth fell nearby, smothering lizards and Venedelans alike.

Suddenly Han screamed too, and a flurry of earth peppered Benny's face. She held her breath, stared wildly round for the new earthfall –

And saw Arko's big, beautiful nose sticking out through the pit wall

from where he'd burrowed down.

Renad reversed the digger and prepared to scoop up another giant's handful.

The Thane still sat dazed on the ground, Hoodath flapping about him.

'Get him away from here, Hoodath,' Renad ordered. 'He must be kept safe.'

Hoodath nodded, and put all his strength into trying to lift the Thane up from the ground.

'We can't pay again,' their majestic ruler was muttering, staring at the Ilijah peeping over the pit walls as they threw themselves into the air. 'Never again.'

'Another monster!' Tinhar yelped.

'You can stay here, then,' Arko grumbled, as Starl threw an arm round the Waska's neck.

'He's a friend,' Benny said as she scrambled over to embrace Arko herself. 'In fact, he's a bloody saviour.'

'The other end comes up behind the hut. They shouldn't see us.' Then Arko caught sight of Shell. His delight quickly turned to watery-eyed fear. 'Oh, pet,' he murmured.

'Out of my way!' Tinhar growled, throwing himself at Arko's tunnel. 'Before we're seen!'

'No,' Benny insisted, losing her patience with this fat wimp

'Shell first.'

'She'll never make the climb up,' Starl said.

Another skip-load of mud crashed down into the pit. Benny was knocked to her knees by the edges of it. There were renewed screams from the survivors.

'What do you suggest we do, leave her?' Benny bawled, gesturing around. 'To die *here*?'

Apparently deciding the debate didn't concern her, Han squeezed herself into the hole and started scrambling up the tunnel, her fear giving her strength. Tinhar squealed with the injustice of it.

'Wait!' Benny gasped, swinging round her filthy rucksack and scrabbling inside. 'The adrenalin compound. The one you stuck in the turnip on Pan Leica. I've still got the syringe!'

Starl nodded. 'Well, quickly then!'

Hoping both for Shell's sake and her own that the bizarro pilot had no communicable diseases, she tossed the half-full syringe to Starl who expertly turned it in his fingers and jabbed Shell in the arm. Almost immediately, she began to shake and moan. Arko squeezed Shell's shoulders and kissed her head. 'I'll get to the top, we'll have to pull her through. Starl, help me.'

Arko vanished through the hole, and Starl considered.

‘Benny...?’

‘Go on, he’s right,’ she said, peering closely at Shell, whose eyes were flickering open. ‘She’ll need all of us. Tinhar and me can help her through from this end.’

Starl wriggled through the gap. More mud thundered down into the pit.

‘Even if we get her out, she’s dead,’ Tinhar shouted. ‘Leave her!’

‘No,’ Benny said simply. ‘Shell, can you stand?’

Shell coughed up some blood. ‘I’ll try,’ she croaked.

‘Failing that, lying down and sticking your arms up into that hole will do,’ Benny said, half-carrying, half-dragging Shell over to the hole. ‘Use your elbows, Shell, try to ease yourself into the tunnel,’ she implored. ‘That’s it! That’s good!’

‘She’s too slow!’ raged Tinhar.

‘Back off!’ Benny yelled, and pushed him away. Without a backward glance, she followed Shell into the tunnel. It was pitch black and narrow, it felt suffocating, but she knew that freedom lay just the other side of it.

‘I can see the stars,’ Shell said. ‘And hands coming down.’

‘Reach for those hands!’ Benny shouted. ‘Come on!’ She jumped as something heavy landed on her legs, and struggled furiously to free herself. ‘No!’

‘Quickly!’ It was Tinhar, pulling himself into the tunnel. ‘Let me in. I’m going to be crushed or buried or eaten or –’

‘I’ll kill you myself,’ warned Benny, wriggling against the tunnel wall for leverage, ‘if you don’t –’

The floor shifted beneath her, as if it were somehow draining away.

‘Quickly, Shell, the hands! Reach for –’

But Benny was too late.

With a shriek, Shell tumbled away into the darkness, and Benny fell helplessly after her.

Starl and Arko stared at each other in horror as three screams echoed up eerily from the darkness.

‘The excavation work,’ Arko reasoned, barely able to articulate his thoughts, his voice a throaty whisper. ‘What if I burrowed down too close to some kind of cave system...’

‘Whatever,’ Starl said grimly. ‘We’ve lost them.’

‘No.’ Arko wiped his eyes. ‘I’m going down looking.’

‘Please, find Tinhar too,’ Han said fiercely. ‘You must. You must.’

‘We’ll do our best to find everyone,’ Starl said, squeezing her arm. ‘But not now. There’s a pit full of killers right beside us, and the Thane and Renad and all his guards just over there, wanting us dead.’ He

shook his head. 'We'll just have to hope they can hold on for us.'

'Shell may not be able to hold on!'

'The Nishtubi must know more about those creatures than we do,' Starl reasoned. 'And they helped those sick people away. We can try to find them, while it's dark, and come back here at dawn when that lot are all sleeping off their hangovers. Okay?'

Arko listened to the noise of the heavy machinery, and Renad barking out his strained commands. He hated to admit it, but he knew Starl was talking sense.

'All right.'

Starl looked at Han, who sighed and nodded. 'Seems we have a plan,' he said, but his smile was already fading. 'What worries me is that, by the looks of things, so do the Nishtubi.'

Forno wished he had simply followed the woman into the forest. Instead he had scurried away from whatever had been dragging itself out from the temple and had somehow stumbled on the trail of the big, smelly, low-voiced creature that had terrified him so successfully before – he'd recognise that cloying, rancid aroma half a planet away. And not only had he chanced upon this monster, he'd managed to track it to a partially-hidden spaceship. From the boxy design, evident from the piles of carefully placed vegetation, Forno assumed it was the ship of the Nishtubi archaeologists. His hunch was proved right when a group of Nishtubi, led by that gruesome General Maddaska, entered the ship.

What was it these monsters had discovered in the temple? And what else was waiting to be found inside?

'What the hell are they doing?' Arko whispered.

Starl shook his head, peering through the trees at the Nishtubi, who were standing like sentinels in the forest clearing. En route for the temple, they'd all heard the screams and moans, loud as a siren. Arko had led the way, desperate to find out if the creatures killed their host every time, or if there was any chance of survival. Han had assured him there was none. Arko wanted to see for himself.

The four Nishtubi formed a semi-circle around three of the infected villagers, two men and a woman, who were writhing and gasping for breath. The Nishtubi merely looked on, impassive; perhaps they were made of stone through and through.

'Put them out of their misery, for God's sake,' Starl muttered.

He noticed Han was just staring too. 'Getting this down for your big story are you?'

'There's nothing we can do,' she said with a shrug. 'Except get out of here.' She placed a hand on his filthy sleeve. 'You've seen what the Ilijah do.'

‘So have the Nishtubi,’ Starl muttered. ‘So why would they want to...’

The older of the two men started shrieking, a terrible sound.

In a measured response, one of the Nishtubi abruptly levelled his rifle and fired it at the man’s head. Han looked away, Arko started forward, but Starl held him back.

‘Get yourself killed and there really is nothing we can do,’ he whispered.

Starl wished dawn wasn’t slipping through the Federation’s cordon so swiftly. He could see the man’s head liquifying, just pouring away. The Nishtubi reached into the gaping hole in the man’s neck and rummaged inside. A squeaking, rattling sound started up, and soon the Nishtubi had pulled out the writhing lizard-thing from inside. Another Nishtubi held open a box, and the creature, struggling furiously against the Nishtubi’s steel grip, was put securely inside.

The Nishtubi watched the other two bodies twitching in the mud, waiting for the next screaming signal to open fire.

‘So this is what it’s all for,’ Starl muttered. ‘All the aid, all the interest...’

‘For *those*?’ Arko whispered gruffly. ‘Those killers?’

‘That’s right. All for them.’ Starl put his head in his hands.

‘They brought in the grain. Now they’re here for the harvest.’

‘Shell...?’

Benny’s eyes flickered wearily open, and she wondered if she’d died and fallen into a ready-made coffin. Her old world had been noisy and frantic, full of pain and horror. She wasn’t surprised it had finally finished her off. Her new landscape was simple and calm: sheet metal, stretches of dull grey close by either side of her, turned gentle blue by hidden lighting.

Beneath her back were clods of earth and something else, something that poked into her. Feeling beneath her, wincing from the bruises she found there, she worked loose a metal grille.

Everything fell into place even faster than she had. They’d fallen down some kind of ducting into a structure beneath.

Goddess, could it be a ventilator shaft? How embarrassing.

Shell was behind her, but Tinhar was nowhere to be seen.

Benny lifted her head so her chin rested on her chest and saw a trail of mud leading away along the shaft. He’d woken up quicker than she had. By the feel of her bruised hips, he’d probably had a soft landing on top of her.

She realised her question had gone unanswered and twisted herself round. With a surge of relief she saw Shell was still breathing, even if the blue lighting did nothing to make her skin seem less angry with lesions.

Shell moaned and stirred.

‘Easy, girl,’ Benny said, sliding up alongside her. ‘You’ve had a busy day.’

‘Benny,’ said Shell, gritting her teeth against some pain Benny didn’t want to imagine, ‘I think your expedition stinks. Do you mind if I go home now?’

Benny forced a smile. ‘I’m with you on that one. We should try to –’

Suddenly, with the sound of rending metal, the shaft shifted, as if the whole section were coming loose around them. Can’t be, thought Benny. We fell down from above, this shaft should be lodged in solid earth. Unless...

She kicked at the grille with a stubbed toe. ‘Shell, when we fell down from above, we breached some kind of perimeter for... *something* beneath the ground.’

‘You think we’re inside it?’ Shell whispered.

‘Yes. I don’t know where we are, or how far we can fall, but –’

The shaft lurched again.

‘It may just be this section of the shaft that’s precarious,’

Benny concluded quickly. ‘I think we should move out of here as fast as we can.’

Using her hands to push herself along on her backside, Benny set off urgently down the shaft.

‘It’s no good,’ Shell gasped behind her. ‘I can’t do that. Too weak.’ She gave Benny a sad smile, though her teeth seemed grey in this light, like tombstones. ‘Maybe when this thing gets out of my gut we can ask it to push?’

‘I’ll save it a job,’ Benny said, manoeuvring herself back alongside Shell, wincing as an occasional, straining, metallic grind started up from within the walls around them. ‘Get in front of me. The floor’s smooth, I’ll push us both along.’

Shell didn’t argue, which Benny took to be a good sign. No

‘leave me here!’ heroics. Shell still had some hope, and that lent strength to Benny. Bracing herself, flexing every muscle she had, she propelled the two of them, this time, along the metal corridor. With every heave and shove, the structure of the shaft seemed to rattle just a little more.

‘Curious.’

Arko turned and looked questioningly at Starl as they paddled through shallow swamp. The trees here were blackened and broken, a sure sign they were near the crash site of either the Nishtubi ship or the *New Dawn*. ‘What’s curious?’

‘Look at the trees. That mud daubed around the trunks.’

Arko didn’t bother. ‘No time for that, come on.’

‘What do you mean?’ Han asked.

Starl splashed across to the nearest spindly tree. ‘It’s wet, sticky with this filth.’

‘It’s in a swamp, man, what do you expect?’ Arko grumbled.

‘No, I see,’ Han said. ‘It’s like the swamp level has gone down. This residue is like a flood mark. The water level was a good deal higher.’

‘Oh. Great.’ Arko shook his head. ‘Well, that sun’s been shining a fair wee bit you know.’

‘I suppose,’ Starl said, but Arko didn’t care how unconvinced he sounded.

Leaving the swamp and moving on to drier land, Arko led the others back to the silent grave marking the spot they’d lost Shell, Benny and Tinhar.

There was a stupid serenity about the scene. Distant birds called to each other, and a light breeze stirred the high branches to a soporific rustling. Arko took deep, mechanical breaths and stared at the fresh mud, wondering just how many dead lay beneath it.

‘Can you operate that?’

Arko turned at the sound of Han’s voice. She and Starl were looking at the mechanical digger, its scooping blade gory with oil and muck.

‘Probably,’ Starl said. ‘But the noise could bring the natives running over here to finish the job they started.’

‘I have to find Tinhar’s body.’

Arko frowned. ‘Sounds like you’ve given up on him.’

She looked away. ‘Arko, can you burrow into the tunnel?’

‘And risk one of those creatures burrowing into him?’ Starl shook his head. ‘I’ll use the machine. We’ll just have to be quick.’

‘We can push the machine to the mouth of the tunnel,’ Arko said. ‘I was watching them excavate the pit from up in a tree. It’s noisy but it gets the job done quick.’

‘As we’ve seen,’ Starl muttered. ‘Right then.’

Han kept a lookout as Arko and Starl strained with the digging machine, moving it into position behind the hut.

Jumping into the driver’s seat, Starl took a few minutes to work out the controls before pressing the ignition.

Burying people or digging them up, the machine growled and roared just the same. The din was terrible in the peace of the forest as the exhumation began.

Arko smiled grimly. This stinking planet deserved no peace.

Starl cut the engine, but as the deep, guttural sound faded a new roar started up.

An Ilijah burst from the ground in a shower of mud, and landed on the bonnet of the digger.

‘Look out!’ Han screamed.

The Ilijah stared round itself. Then, apparently focusing on the nearest life form, it projected a huge jet of watery fluid at Starl's face.

10 Shafted

The smelly fluid spattered against the tiny windscreen in all directions. Starl threw himself out of the vehicle. Han shrieked again. Arko looked around for something to hit it with.

The shovel blade practically bisected the creature and pierced through the metal of the digger's bonnet. The Ilijah died in a frothing puddle of its own blood.

'Club sandwich,' muttered Arko.

Han came cautiously nearer while Starl got up and inspected the mess.

'What is that stuff?' he said, pointing at the goo still sliding down the windscreen. Inside the glutinous liquid were what looked like tiny bubbles, refusing to burst. A breeze carried a clutch of them away, almost invisible against the air.

'Could be eggs,' Han ventured, looking suddenly pale. 'It must've been aiming for your mouth.'

'Shell...' breathed Arko. 'Her mouth was all sticky when I laid her down. One of those eggs must've blown down her throat.'

He shuddered.

Han nodded. 'Seems Renad wasn't as thorough in purifying the forests of Ilijah as he thought.'

'Look at the thing,' Starl said, shuddering. 'So much bigger than the others in the pit.'

'Just our luck to get the daddy,' Arko noted.

Han shook her head. 'No, I mean they should all be newborn, right? But look at this.' She flicked a shiny flap of grey hanging ragged from the creature's leg with a long fingernail. 'It's like it's been shedding skin already.'

'Looks almost like it came out of some kind of cocoon,' Starl haltingly agreed.

'What is this, a wildlife documentary?' Arko rumbled. 'We've got to find our friends.'

'It's not right,' Han muttered, clearly quite worried. The stupid girl should get her priorities right, Arko thought, as he started burrowing impatiently into the hole Starl had started.

He gritted his teeth. He had a horrible feeling he'd soon be showing her something to get really worried about.

But he was wrong. He found his way down to the tunnel with no further incident, and found beyond that a kind of hollow in the rock and mud. But there were no bodies. There was no sign of Shell, or Benny, or Tinhar at all.

‘It’s getting worse,’ Shell shouted, though Benny reflected she needn’t have bothered. It was pretty hard to miss the fact that the vibrations and the din of metal twisting and grinding had moved on a couple of steps beyond ominous to downright apocalyptic.

‘We’ll reach the end of this section soon,’ Benny gasped, her head buzzing, clammy with sweat.

‘There’s a way leading off here,’ Shell reported urgently. ‘To our right.’

Benny’s heart leapt. ‘An exit?’

‘I’m not sure. It seems to lead downwards, there’s a slight gradient. And the lighting’s different...’

Shell seemed to come to a decision. Abruptly manoeuvring round, she started shuffling herself backwards along the new shaft. From where Benny was sitting it looked as if the woman was actually disappearing into the wall.

‘Careful, Shell,’ Benny warned. ‘We don’t know what’s down there...’ *And you’re weak, and sick, and any minute now a monster could come bursting out of you and this shaft could collapse and kill us both and I got us into this, it was me, me, me, me...*

‘There’s a way out, I think!’ Shell’s excited voice floated back, metallic with echo.

‘How do you know?’ Benny heaved herself forward. ‘Hold on, I’m coming to look.’

Shell didn’t seem to have heard her. ‘The blue light, so much bluer here... Slippery... But I can feel cold air, clean air-’

Benny’s heart seemed to stop at the sound of Shell’s shriek, and she was stunned for seconds by the helpless, falling sound as its echoes ululated around the cramped contours of the shaft. It ended with a fierce hissing, crackling noise, as if a giant snake had wandered into a field generator. With that image unpleasantly in mind, Benny drew cautiously level with the opening Shell had taken.

There was no trace of Shell in the shaft. Benny found herself looking at a halo of bright icy blue around a darkness too profound to be called simply black. Had Shell fallen, or...

Benny shuddered. The shaft rattled as if in sympathy. Tears stinging her eyes, Benny threw herself on to her hands and knees and went beetling off along the shaft, as fast as she could. She set her lips. There had to be some other way out of here.

The shaft lurched still more sickeningly about her.

Ukka, the biggest and surliest of the two guards Arko had shot down, was still struggling to free himself from the mud hole that held him. The vegetation piled around his head was itching and irritating him. Every now and then his communicator would vibrate, Maddaska no

doubt. There'd be hell to pay when he found them, and Ukka didn't want to be buried up to his neck when that happened – his head would make too good a target for the general's boot. But despite his almost constant stream of curses and vitriol since his gradual awakening, Ukka had been unable to rouse Antrin from his stunned state.

But something else seemed to have heard him.

He made the thing out in the pale dawn light through the green fronds that covered him. Saw hook-like claws, and brown scaly skin. Heard the rasp of a thick, slimy tongue against rows of teeth.

'Antrin...' Ukka whispered. 'Just wake up, would you?'

Suddenly a small, spiky snake-head pushed through the greenery and two fierce eyes scrutinised him.

Ukka had never seen an Ilijah up close before.

The next thing he knew, the thing had spat in his face, a long thick burst of sour drool that got up his nose, in his mouth, his eyes. He coughed and spluttered so violently that at last he felt the earth around him shift, and with all his strength pulled one arm free and slapped it down on the Ilijah, which hissed and squawked, then wriggled free.

'Thanks for that, little friend,' Ukka said, setting about freeing himself in earnest now.

'What's that on your face?' Antrin said. Typical of the lazy sod to wake up now there was a way out of this embarrassing situation.

'Raw egg,' Ukka said, his great hands spading out chunks of mud from around Antrin's neck. 'Shame you can't try some, he's run off.'

'Ilijah?'

'Yeah. Shame we couldn't catch it. Could've been one of the second generations Maddaska's after. And we could use a gold star right now.'

'Don't worry,' Antrin said. 'Even with all those re-engineerings... we're still immune.'

'Of course we are, stupid,' Ukka said, spitting out another goblet of thick saliva. 'I know that.' Antrin could join in the digging now. 'But we're not immune to the sorts of thing Maddaska can do to us, so how about we think up a good story on our way back to the ship?'

This is it.

The tearing of metal was reaching a crescendo. Benny kept ploughing on, her knees raw and bleeding, hands stinging from the relentless slap, slap, slap against metal.

'Yes!'

Benny yelled the word out as she rounded the corner. Ahead of her, cool blue metal fell away into blackness – and after this gap, the rest of the shaft seemed to continue quite securely.

The only problem was, of course, that the gap was probably as long as she was and she had no way of getting up enough impetus to cross the divide.

Benny reached into her rucksack. Something snapped above her and the shaft pitched forwards a little, almost over-balancing her. Soon she'd have no chance of clearing the gap.

The metal ball felt cool and soothing in her clammy grip.

'Activate,' she ordered Joseph, and as the shaft lurched again, she threw herself into the unknowable blackness.

Joseph gave a short squawk of surprise as he struggled to rise, and realised his mistress was not letting go of him.

It wasn't much of a lift for Benny, but for a split-second she was supported in midair and able to grab for the jagged metal of the other section with her free hand. Gasping, she let go of Joseph and clutched on to the lip of the shaft tightly with both hands.

She hung there, suspended in darkness.

'Joseph!' she called, and the globe bobbed down to hover anxiously around her.

'I should advise you that my levitation engines are designed to cope only with the pressures of certain high-gravity worlds and not the weight of a -'

'Not now,' Benny gasped. 'Just tell me how deep this drop is.' Joseph bobbed down into the darkness.

He didn't come back.

Benny dangled from the precipice with a sinking feeling. She felt her wrists tingling with pins and needles, and knew she had to move before she lost all feeling in her hands. The sharp edges sliced into her palms as she tried to pull herself up, teeth gritted. Every muscle ached and the veins in each arm felt like they would burst from her skin, but with a grunt of determined effort she hauled herself up so her elbows were supporting her.

Then she scraped her torso up until the metal was cutting into her waist, and shuffled along on her elbows and chest until her groin was supported too and she was no longer in danger of falling.

She wanted to laugh with relief but only half-strangled sobs came out of her as she struggled to get her breath back, to relax, shut down for just a few moments. She knew if she stopped she'd never feel like moving again, but sod it.

'Total distance to the ground is a fraction over forty-seven metres,' Joseph reported.

Benny took the news stoically. 'If I'd fallen I'd be dead?'

'Undoubtedly,' sniffed Joseph. 'I encountered a great deal of extremely sharp debris.'

But Benny didn't have time to dwell on this. She'd heard something

up ahead. Shuffling footsteps, echoing slowly on metal. In the cold atmosphere of the blue lights it sounded particularly sinister. Like something was pacing about, waiting.

Benny used her toes to edge herself forward, slowly, along the shaft. With a mixture of unease and excitement she saw there was a junction ahead, a chute leading down. It seemed innocuous enough; the fierce blue light that had shone at Shell was absent; there was just the regular, chilly glow to match the chilly air. And whatever was making the footsteps would soon pass below her.

She held her breath and peered down the shaft. Suddenly, a pink disc spiked with straggly brown came into view.

It was the top of Tinhar's head.

Scrabbling into the chute, Benny wasted no time in dropping down heavily behind him into some kind of hub area in the ducting system, to give him what she hoped was the absolute fright of his life.

Tinhar didn't disappoint. His scream almost pierced her eardrums.

'You were dead,' he blustered eventually. 'You were, I swear it.' 'You didn't look very closely,' Benny said, taking a step forward with a scowl she hoped was suitably menacing. 'That wasn't very thorough of you, *Administrator* Tinhar.'

'But... But I had to save myself!' he babbled. 'You can see that, can't you? We fell through the outer vents and into the air-conditioning. The ducting wouldn't be designed for an impact like that, would it? And since it's been here, undisturbed, for so many centuries, and possibly weakened by minor tectonic shifts – that is to say...'

Benny raised an eyebrow. 'Centuries?'

Tinhar stopped babbling, and instead looked astonished.

'Well, I mean... it stands to reason, doesn't it? Buried underground, it must've been here for hundreds of years at the very least...'

'On a primitive planet like Venedel, why would anyone bury anything that would need air-conditioning?' Benny demanded, taking a step closer. 'And why would there be air in the vents now?'

'I don't know!' protested Tinhar, his face clearly turning puce even in the cerulean glow. 'But whatever it is, it's nothing to do with the Earthlink Federation, I can assure you of that.'

Just then, the abruptly ignored Joseph plopped down from above and fell sulkily into Benny's rucksack. The movement knocked the bag from her shoulder, and she stooped to pick it up. And something on the ground caught her eye.

'You can assure me of that, can you, Tinhar?' she asked with a wry smile. 'That's why there's a little logo and the words,

'Made in Federated Worlds' stencilled on to this steel plate, right?'

Benny contemplated asking Joseph to measure the precise distance Tinhar's face had fallen, but settled for rising swiftly and shoving the

feebly gesticulating man back against the wall.

‘Before I take out my many, many frustrations on your nose,’

Benny said with her fist drawn back and a sweet smile on her face, ‘perhaps you’d like to tell me something about what the hell is going on round here?’

‘Hoodath,’ said the Thane, ‘kindly put down your pen.’

Hoodath stared at him in alarm, and Mahel could see him struggling to compose his features into something more respectful to his ruler. He’d seemed deathly pale before, but now...

‘My lord?’

‘I have something I wish to say but no desire to see it recorded.’

Mahel sank heavily back in his throne. He’d been wise after all to allow half the palace wine reserves to be consumed; he couldn’t imagine much else capable of lulling his people back to sleep after the nightmare they had witnessed at the pit. And for himself, the Thane of Mahel, to be struck down by an alien before his own people... he shuddered.

He had never felt more alone. His wise men, his court, he had sent staggering sickly away to arrange and organise the absolute isolation of the province. With the Ilijah now carried in the living, no chances could be taken. From Shadow Coast to the fungus mountains, a strict quarantine must be observed, the threat to be contained at all costs. Sheets of flame would soon billow in the harbour as the Thane’s fleet of fine ships were destroyed. No one must escape. No one must be tempted to escape. Himself included.

No, it would be some time before sleep could claim him again after today. A pity. The transient pleasure of knowing nothing at all had been his only solace for some time. And now...

Hoodath let his pen fall to the animal skin at his feet.

‘You saw what happened at the pit, Hoodath. We face Ilijah that have found a way to twist and defile Nature itself. Creatures that can grow and be nourished in the bodies of the living, instead of those of the dead...’

Hoodath shivered. ‘I did, my lord.’

Mahel paused. ‘I fear, Hoodath, that your official history may soon come to a somewhat abrupt end.’

Hoodath dropped his parchment, which fell over his pen like a shroud. ‘My lord?’ he squeaked.

‘With aliens above and an old threat below... Perhaps you should compose a suitably elegaic final chapter to the lineage of our people?’

Hoodath’s head muddled about somewhere between a nod and a shake.

‘Just in case,’ Mahel said, smiling sadly. He patted his faithful

scribe's sorry head. 'After a lifetime's work, it only seems right you should end our history on the note of your choosing.'

Renad leant back heavily against the perimeter hut. He was patrolling the boundary of the forest alone. His men, dead drunk, were asleep or unconscious. When they woke their mouths would be dry but their bellies full. The feast would help them, physically, for a few days. But Renad feared that the shock of witnessing the Ilijah active and unstoppable on Venedel once again, despite all his efforts, had done more damage than the hunger could ever have achieved.

The mood of the people would be one of sorry despair; Renad knew that, because he felt its ache himself. With all the power of the past, the long dead Ilijah had escaped the cold clutches of the underworld and returned more virulent than ever. Just like the prophecies said of the ancient gods of darkness.

Renad considered the Temple. He had been a boy of ten when the Federation had first come to Venedel, when the teachers had arrived. He remembered the white, bony woman who taught his unruly class that the world of Nature was simple and easy to explain in terms of Science. She had smiled when the class had fiercely denied this.

'It's only natural you and your fellows feel some conflict,' she'd said. 'There is always a tension between science and nature. People all over the galaxy have felt exactly the same.'

Renad remembered thinking it impossible that anyone could feel the same way as he did at the thought of such blasphemies.

The tension between Science and Nature was a good one, the woman had said, as long as people remembered that Science would always win. Now he imagined the Ilijah bursting from her head like a maggot through mouldy fruit, leading a plague to reduce the Federation's science to rot as easily as they would the people of Venedel.

A moan of pain rose up from behind the hut door, and Renad looked inside. Nazan was stirring, dabbing delicately at his head with his fingertips.

'Wake up, Nazan. I want your counsel.'

Nazan's eyes opened wide involuntarily, and he flinched from the daylight Renad had allowed into the poky hut.

'What is it?' Nazan asked softly.

'There is a... tension in me,' Renad confessed. 'I am torn between visiting the ancient temple and praying for salvation, or going to the Nishtubi and demanding answers as to why they set the sick free into the forest.'

Nazan shrugged weakly and he closed his eyes again. 'They are aliens,' he said. 'Aliens betray.'

Renad nudged him with his foot. 'I know. And yet a part of me wishes to make them see their folly – they are too strong for us to fight, and the people still need their food and aid. Which do I turn to, Nazan, to the gods or to the aliens?'

But Nazan had returned to his fitful sleep.

All Renad could return to was the humid warmth of the world outside, with all its dangers and mysteries. He rested his head back against the rough wood of the perimeter hut and closed his eyes, weary of thinking. Then, with sudden resolve, he strode off into the forest.

Arko tramped moodily back through the forest with Starl and Han at his heels. They were heading to the temple to collect Forno, and then they were going to go and set up a small base camp, a meeting point, before splitting up and looking for the Nishtubi ship, their only ticket off this festering world.

'It stinks to be leaving them,' Arko announced to no one in particular, and not for the first time.

He heard Starl sigh behind him. 'What else can we do now?'

I don't want to leave Venedel like this, believe me...' Starl's voice grew quieter, less brash for a change, and as far as the Waska could tell, he was sincere. 'The whole mission's been an complete failure.'

'Mission?' Han queried.

'Yeah,' Starl said. 'To study the temple, I mean. The expedition's in tatters, and now everyone and everything here wants to kill us.'

'And half of us, it has,' Arko brooded. He'd wanted to stay at the pit and search longer for Shell and the others. He'd have dug a whole warren if he could. But guards from the village had approached, doubtless coming to inspect the pit for wayward Ilijah. Han had been all in favour of just hiding out and letting Arko do the digging under the guards' noses, but even the Waska had had to accept the pitfalls of that plan. He'd do his friends no good by becoming a martyred grilled chop for them.

'I'm sick of this bloody forest,' Han said, disconsolate. She'd been sulking all the way from the pit. She and Tinhar must've been close, Arko decided.

'Me too, pet,' he said, and gave her an encouraging squeeze on the arm. 'I've been back and forth, back and forth, with nothing to see but swamp and trees and...'

Arko fell silent in surprise as a tall, human female crashed through the vegetation ahead with a beatific smile on her face.

She was entirely naked save for some pellucid tunic affair swaddling her slim body from shoulders to thighs. From the astonishment on Starl's face and the disapproving grimace on Han's, Arko guessed that

by human standards she was very attractive – straight blonde hair, a narrow, perfectly symmetrical face with wide green eyes and lips like long red slugs, bulging with collagen.

The vision came to a halt before them, like some weird heavenly visitation.

‘I have been in darkness,’ she said calmly in a low, mellifluous voice, ‘and now I know light again. And it is glorious, glorious. To wake, to rise up, to...’

She trailed off as her eyes closed, and then she collapsed into Starl’s arms.

Everybody stared at everybody else. Then there was another rustling of vegetation, and Arko prepared himself for either a whole host of angels, a Nishtubi death squad, a clutch of lizard-snakes or spear-toting natives. Nothing could surprise him any more.

Except the sight of an unkempt Waska crashing through into the clearing, running at him with a whoop of delight. Han shrieked, but Starl assured her things were okay.

A moment later Arko was flat on his back with Forno on top of him, licking joyfully at his face. ‘I never thought I’d find you!’

Forno said. ‘Never! And so much has happened, I must tell you, *I must.*’

Arko looked up with both delight and irritation to find Starl smiling down at him, weighing the strange new arrival in his arms and considering.

‘I think I got the better deal,’ Starl said.

Since Benny realised that, once out of the ducting hub, they’d be back on their hands and knees, she’d decided to consolidate her remaining strength and make Tinhar ‘fess up all he knew right here. Not only was it bliss for her tired aching back not to have to stoop, but she could stand over Tinhar and intimidate him while she rested. It was well worth the extra strain on her voice from shouting over the noisy fanning systems.

Trouble was, Tinhar didn’t seem to have many beans to spill about this place. He’d gone abruptly back on his theory of the place being hundreds of years old, and now claimed to be of the belief they were crawling in the innards of some kind of underground nuclear bunker. Such underground retreats were a boon supplied by the Federation for the people of every newly-acquired planet as standard, and a symbol of their desire to protect.

‘Bollocks,’ Benny said. ‘The natives here don’t even have guns, let alone atomic weapons.’

‘They could have, with time and under Federation guidance!’

Tinhar retorted loyally.

‘Hip hooray,’ Benny said drily. ‘Hey, what about the Nishtubi? They’ve been here a while...’ She shook her head.

‘No, not long enough to construct something like this. And this place was built using Federation materials... Although their crap handiwork could explain the knackered vent shaft.’

‘The Federation would never entrust major construction projects to as dismal a race of lackeys as the Nishtubi,’ Tinhar said grandly.

‘No, only major archaeological works,’ Benny commented bitterly. ‘The thugs. Nothing seems to add up round here.’

Tinhar smiled tightly. ‘I suppose the Nishtubi had to turn to a second career once the Federation ended the terror campaigns of their employers.’

‘Which employers?’

Tinhar looked like he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar for a moment, but quickly composed himself. ‘The Boor, of course.’

‘Boor? Why “of course”?’

The smile glued to Tinhar’s face seemed in imminent peril of slipping. ‘They were the Nishtubi’s most notorious employers.’

‘Were they? I’ve not heard of them.’

Tinhar affected disinterest. ‘It was many centuries ago now.’

Benny’s eyes narrowed and she put on her sternest dominatrix voice. ‘You have a keen interest in the distant past, don’t you, Tinhar?’

‘I... I suppose I was put in mind of them by the Ilijah,’ Tinhar blurted.

‘And just why is that?’

‘Well... that’s what they *used*, you see. The Boor used those creatures to get what they wanted, whether it be cash, goods or planetwide subjugation.’

‘Used them?’ Benny poked him with her toe. ‘How?’

Tinhar looked wretched. ‘The Ilijah aren’t native to Venedel. They originated on a planet inhabited only by animals. The Ilijah are amazingly adaptable. They can fertilise their own eggs, and they can incubate them in practically any creature big enough to hold them.’

‘Go on,’ Benny nodded.

Tinhar did, oddly warming to his subject. ‘In the natural way of things – I believe – the Ilijah squirt their eggs down the throats of a host. The victim then dies, and the gases released through the cellular breakdown of the host’s internal organs form the perfect environment for incubating the eggs and nurturing the newborn.’

‘For an accountant you make an excellent naturalist, Tinhar,’

Benny said, still suspicious as hell. ‘Go on, where do the Boor fit in?’

‘They took them from that world and genetically re-engineered them, shortening their lifespan dramatically while boosting their aggression and fertility. They would let loose a colony on a targeted

world and watch them run amok. Imagine it, plagues of those creatures running loose, killing and laying their eggs in ever greater numbers.' Tinhar shuddered.

'How did that help the Boor?' She rolled her eyes. 'Throw me a bone here, Tinhar!'

'Because when the Boor re-engineered them they built in a chemically-activated degenerative gene into their cellular make-up. The Boor would supply the targeted planet with a carefully-measured amount of a serum that would kill the Ilijah and keep up continued immunity, in return for a regular payment or whatever, I don't know.'

"We'll never pay again," the Thane said...' Benny mused.

'Nice scheme. Well, well, you're quite a dark horse, aren't you Tinhar?'

Tinhar looked tired and vacant. 'I don't understand.'

'Not really an accountant *or* a naturalist. You're a scientist.'

Tinhar didn't react. 'Bit of a historian too, though, aren't you. What happened to the Boor?'

Tinhar shrugged. 'Stellar police broke up their rackets in the end, and they went to ground.'

'Stellar police? Sounds a bit corny.'

'That would've been the relevant law-enforcing agency in this sector at the time,' Tinhar said sniffily. 'About four or five hundred years ago.'

'So what are the Ilijah doing here on Venedel? Why now, after so long?' Benny sighed. 'And where the hell *are* we?'

She was answered by a terrible juddering noise, as if someone had just thrown a particularly weighty spanner into whatever works this place possessed.

'What's that?' Benny shouted, helping Tinhar to his feet.

Tinhar gnawed anxiously on his knuckle, staring around with dread. 'If a section has broken free from the ducting, I suppose air imbalances could further destabilise the structure.'

'Meaning what?' Benny demanded. 'Another cave in?'

'I don't know!' Tinhar shouted at her. 'I don't know!'

A shower of sparks from the cables in the ceiling above made them both cry out in alarm and duck.

Then, half a ton of earth fell in from the ceiling, and the venting hub seemed to tear itself apart in a fiery explosion.

11 Glory Days

Starl looked down thoughtfully at the sleeping woman. She didn't seem any less attractive for being wrapped in his long leather coat.

'You'll complicate things,' he muttered. 'I'm sure of it.'

Han wandered over from her look-out position at the clearing's edge.

'No sign of Arko or Forno?' Starl asked.

She shook her head. 'Still out collecting the things for our camp like good little hamsters.'

Starl shot her a sour glance. 'It keeps them occupied.'

'Takes Arko's mind off that girl, you mean. Shell, was it?' Han looked at Starl slyly, and pointed at the sleeping stranger. 'And is *she* taking your mind off Benny Summerfield?'

'No,' Starl said frankly. 'She isn't.'

'Well-under, isn't she,' Han commented.

'Perhaps it's something to do with this.' Starl pulled back the coat and pointed to a small piece of plastic embedded in the woman's neck.

Han frowned. 'What's that meant to be?'

'A regulatory valve for a catheter of some kind, I think,' Starl replied. 'There's another of them in her wrist.'

'That size?' Han snorted. 'Talk about invasive surgery. When did she have it done, the Middle Ages?'

'Some time ago,' Starl agreed vaguely. 'Be interesting to hear what she has to say when she wakes up.'

'I can't go on,' Tinhar wailed, on all fours like a dog in the burning hub chamber. 'I can't!'

'You can, and you bloody well will,' Benny shouted at him.

'We're getting out of here.'

The blast that had torn through the hub had almost taken her head off. In a second, the cool clean blue had been replaced with hellfire and pitch. Smoke so thick it looked solid was pumping out of a control stack, starting to fill the room, and the sputtering vents, haphazardly engaging, were fanning each tiny spark from the shattered electrics into a raging flame.

No air imbalance could've caused this.

For the hundredth time, Benny wished she knew where the hell they were, and offered a pleading glance heavenwards.

Then, through lazy smoke spirals, she saw it.

'Tinhar,' she shouted. 'See that buckling in the ceiling?' It was like they were in an upturned foil tray and a finger had squashed down on one edge. 'It's had a knock-on effect on the wall there. I think we can

prise the wall panels loose.'

Pulling her sweater up over her head to protect her hair, Benny leapt through a wall of flame. She reached out to a dented panel and tried to slide her fingers round it. With a cry of pain, she found it to be burning hot. So instead she took the trowel from her rucksack and wedged its blade between the two wall panels. Then she heaved on the handle as hard as she could.

The panel fell away with the minimum of fuss.

Beyond it was more metal.

'I knew it!' Tinhar wailed.

Anger and frustration rising inside her, Benny kicked at the metal as hard as she could. It rattled. She kicked it again, light-headed and choking from the smoke, and again, her leg jarring with the effort. But the panelling was giving. It was denting, and straining, and if she just... kept... going...

With a shout, Benny finally knocked the panel free. Smoke from behind her started pouring through the gap, and she knew there was no time to exult at this fresh chance. Grabbing hold of Tinhar, she threw him forward to face first whatever might lurk in the dark.

'So, this is your explanation for twelve hours out of contact?'

Maddaska asked impatiently outside the Nishtubi ship, sheltered from the bright morning sun in the shade of the cargo doors. 'You allowed two animals to overcome you and bury you in mud?'

Ukka shifted uncomfortably. Typical that he had lost the toss and had to come here grovelling with excuses while Antrin got back to guarding the temple. There were dozens of them, General he began.

'There were *two* of them, Ukka, I have met them already. And when I meet them again...' He clenched his fists. 'Get inside. Go on, out of my sight. Garvok will guard the temple with Antrin in your place. You shall stay here and serve High Boor Bantagel.'

Ukka stared at Maddaska, aghast. 'Yes, General.'

A few moments later Garvok emerged from the ship and saluted stiffly.

'Mess things up and I'll kill you myself,' Maddaska snarled.

'Now go.'

Garvok marched off, and Maddaska stared moodily back out into the forest, squinting into the sunlight for any sign of his field squad. He didn't care for the sun. It made his head ache.

But then, so too did the excesses of incense fouling the atmosphere on board the ship for Bantagel's benefit.

Maddaska didn't like to stay in that suffocating environment for any longer than he had to.

The Boor's current mood was another very good reason for staying

outside.

Putin, Maddaska's adjutant, previously assigned to cater for the Boor's every whim, emerged from the ship. Maddaska smiled thinly to see him gulp down lungfuls of clean, unscented air.

'That'll learn Ukka,' Putin muttered.

'Bantagel's mood is no sweeter, then?' the general inquired.

Putin shook his head. 'Whatever his stink may suggest,' he said bitterly.

'Our glory is entwined with his own, Putin. He will win a new golden age for our people.'

'He will rot our noses first,' Putin said miserably. 'Or burn off my ears with his complaining. How are we to know what happened to make his temple's systems start acting up again? He should know, shouldn't he?'

'You must have respect, Putin. Field squad will return with the mutated test subjects soon. Bantagel will be sweet enough to us then.'

Putin looked doubtful. 'There is news of a Federation summit to discuss the Venedel crisis. Rumour of fresh atrocities. Talk of force.'

'Force,' Maddaska sneered. 'The Earthlink Federation could not force an old woman across the road. They are soft and corrupt. Whereas *we*...'

As a hatchling of military rank, Maddaska had heard all the great, secret stories of the glory days of his race, when the Nishtubi were partners in crime with the great Boor gangsters.

They were easy days of fine living. A Nishtubi back then had respect, had access to the good things in life. The galaxy was like a coconut tree – all you had to do was simply use a little force, shake it a bit, and then gather the fruit that fell down from on high.

Time had changed all that of course. When the last of the Boor had finally been put away or gone to ground, the Nishtubi's glorious reputation had just trickled away. Enforced membership of the Federation tamed them, made them betray their old paymasters, turned a race of fierce, loyal mercenaries into nothing more than odd-job men. The military elite became a ceremonial indulgence as the Nishtubi learnt to pay their way again, or face the consequences. And being supremely equipped to adapt from a history of ever-changing paymasters, they had learnt well.

Maddaska had made it his life's mission to break that teaching. He'd taken kowtowing runts like Putin and given them pride and purpose. He'd discovered the truth behind the breakdown of the Boor empire, and built up a secret network of contacts that would enable him exploit it.

Soon now, the Boor would be back in action. This time, as the Nishtubi's equal partners. Bantagel was stubborn and old, a relic, but

he would learn to accept the situation.

‘Finally,’ Maddaska commented, surveying his three Nishtubi as they crashed through the tiresome greenery and into the clearing. As they approached, a quiet drumming grew louder.

He realised the noise was coming from the lead storage box in his sergeant’s arms.

‘You were successful, I take it?’

‘We were, General,’ the sergeant grunted. ‘We have two definite second-generation specimens. A third escaped.’

‘Take them through to Boor Bantagel,’ Maddaska instructed, a sneering smile twisting his lips as he followed his men inside.

‘We will shortly have the means to ensure our future prosperity for ever.’

There was something to see here after all. Now that Benny’s eyes had adjusted – or perhaps now the flames had really taken hold inside the hub chamber – she could see pictograms on a rocky wall, smudgy and angular.

‘I think we’re inside the Argian temple.’

Tinhar didn’t react well to the news. ‘How can that be?’

‘Easily. That ducting is part of a structure built on the temple site. Or rather, under it.’ Benny wished she had a torch. ‘I think these markings represent the names and prayers of those who built the temple. On past experience, that would suggest we’re in some kind of service tunnel constructed to get equipment and men inside the temple without defiling the holy chambers.’ She looked at Tinhar. ‘I’ve seen similar passages extending for over a mile around an Argian temple, in all directions. Perhaps the ducting follows a similar course.’

‘But why, Benny?’ Tinhar should’ve asked. ‘Why should anyone construct something as vast as this under the ground in secret, Benny, so long ago?’ But he said nothing, just rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Benny decided to do some thinking herself. Hoodath had said the natives only reclaimed this land, presumably razed and depopulated by the Argians to protect their temple, hundreds of years ago – by which time the temple’s very existence was forgotten. So this place had to be older than that... And the relics in the Thane’s antechamber were genuine, so it stood to reason they’d actually come from the temple here. The Nishtubi weren’t really archaeologists. They had to be here for whatever was inside the hidden structure that ducting served.

But why?

It was something to do with the Ilijah, it had to be.

Maddaska hadn’t been surprised when the Ilijah first appeared, he’d just winked at her. And now she remembered him saying back at the

temple, *'I'm sure you have no kind of immunity whatsoever...'*

A wave of heat against her back prompted her to think that if Maddaska really *was* after whatever was hidden here, he'd better hurry. Whatever it was, it could well be on the way out.

'So should we be,' Benny said, finishing her train of thought aloud, and coughed. 'Come on, Tinhar. That smoke's probably toxic. It'll do for us even if the flames don't.'

'Where will this tunnel take us?'

Benny wondered what she should say to be kind. Then she decided that the burden of knowledge was one best shared, especially if you didn't much like your companion. 'The Argians often caved in the ends of their service tunnels when work was completed,' she said. 'Then again, whoever built the ducting could've built across the tunnels and blocked them off well before then. We're just going to have to wait and see.'

Tinhar looked at her with hangdog eyes.

'After you,' Benny said.

The lights flickered on in the darkened prison. The generator had fallen dead some time in the night, but Hoodath knew how to make it start. It made quite a racket, but he imagined the people were sleeping heavily, and too troubled by their dreams to notice.

He had not been here for some time, and he'd missed the calm it brought to him. Hoodath often sneaked in here when he was in low spirits and in need of solitude. His presence here was forbidden; no one was allowed to taint themselves through use of the stuff which the Thane had stored away in here. The cell was crammed with technological equipment.

Each time Hoodath went inside and stared at the odd-looking devices he imagined the door slamming shut behind him, of Renad smiling and locking him inside.

Renad hated him, just because Hoodath could read and write. No – because he *wanted* to read and write. He wanted to learn more, all he could. He knew that if he could make the boxes in this room work for him he would understand so many, many things. But they sat there, heaped up, broken and scuffed. Relics of a time when the universe seemed to beckon to Venedel, and to people like Hoodath. But now... since the Nishtubi had come, since the Thane had lent Renad his ear in matters of state, and since friends in the sky had turned to enemies...

'There is so much I would know,' Hoodath murmured to the room. 'So much I would share with the future.'

Hoodath sighed and surveyed his rusting Utopia. Only the telex machine seemed to function still, spewing out paper so fine, so thin, it

seemed impossible to him... He had stopped reading the messages the telex spat out, for fear of letting the knowledge slip by accident, revealing his treachery in coming here. But if, as the Thane suggested, the end really was coming...

Hoodath sat, adjusted his glasses, and squinted at the paper, the uneven whirr of the generator still soothing him as he read.

Maddaska watched as the grand old Boor took the box from Ukka with a low hiss of satisfaction. As ever, he could see how the Boor had intimidated half the galaxy. With hideous, misshapen heads, that looked as though they'd been held face down first in boiling water, then in sulphuric acid, lolling atop their squat, blubbery bodies, legend had it the Boor's physical appearance alone had persuaded more than one race to part with its protection money. There'd been no need for any further, messier demonstrations of the Boor's power.

He considered the lead box and the scrabbling and thumping from within it. Such races had been lucky.

'Last, you get me my needing,' the Boor said, his voice gravelly and dry. 'Last. Glad we never had to wait for busting-out of dead men, huh?'

'I take it two specimens of the... *revised* breed of Ilijah will suffice for further experimentation?'

Bantagel chuckled. 'These babies will catch your galaxy in the surprise. Your doped grain done its stuff good – in the end.'

Maddaska felt himself bristling. 'The doctored supplies have taken only a matter of months to augment the natives into viable carriers. And our Ilijah have adapted just as our experts said they would. You can take apart these second-generation examples and see for yourself.'

Bantagel looked at him smugly, his eyes like tiny brown beads lodged in the cold stodge of his face. 'You ain't got no serum for wiping out what you started.' His tone grew rougher.

'You Nishtubi, you never see through what we start, huh?'

Taking a deep, unwelcome breath of Bantagel's sickly aroma, Maddaska struggled to stay patient. The eyes of all his men were upon him too. He could not afford to lose respect. 'The past no longer matters in the light of such a glorious future together. You are aware of the expense of this project, of the many scientists we have had to pay. You must be aware also that if a preventative serum were easy to come by, our plans would be futile. Naturally, now that you have returned to us, we turn to you and to your people's expertise to make our plan a success.'

'You want to be partners, equal-like,' Bantagel said, nodding heavily, his chins slipping over themselves. 'And you expect we to do you the real work.'

Maddaska coughed, uncomfortably. He well knew that the Boor was prone to these acts of bullying self-aggrandisement, just as he knew that with all the work *he* had done for the old creature, legend or not, Bantagel should be down on his knees thanking him.

‘We have devoted years to reviving your influence,’

Maddaska pointed out.

‘You wake me up a little late for this,’ Bantagel interrupted, harping on on the same old theme.

Maddaska went on, undaunted. ‘We have procured the means to fashion a great and glorious future, for both our peoples. When you are able to cure the plague we have unleashed on this idiot world, you will be taking the first strides *into* that future.’

Maddaska’s men applauded automatically. There was a standing order that they should clap in response to every stirring speech he made. The Boor had held Maddaska’s gaze with those tiny eyes the whole time, listening intently with that slightly mocking smile just as he always did.

‘You not leave us much time,’ Bantagel said. ‘Sounds like the Fed’ration gonna blow this whole world cinders soon.’ He tapped the lead box. ‘But, we know these babies. We give the future a kick in the pants, all right. Then out of here.’

Maddaska bowed, reverently. ‘Then out of here.’

Having crept past the indolent Nishtubi guard, and crouching out of sight behind the door, Renad felt that his heart had sucked in all his blood and was pumping fire around his body in its place. He had heard every word the aliens had said, and understood almost all of them.

He cursed himself and his weak faith. He had come here to plead like a child with these monsters for help, instead of visiting the temple and asking for strength and vengeance. The gods must be looking down on him and laughing at his choice.

Or perhaps... perhaps they had meant him to see this all along.

To make him realise to whom his duties and labours truly belonged.

The conflict inside him had dwindled with every sickening word that fell from Maddaska’s mouth. It took every scrap of Renad’s self-control to stop himself from driving his knife deep into the soggy face of that monster in the middle. The people of Venedel had been taken for fools – for fools and for testing and, ultimately, for killing. The food, accepted so gratefully, so eagerly, so desperately, had been fattening their bellies to make room for the Ilijah; a slow poison that had dragged the Ilijah out of the world of the dead and into his own. Maddaska spoke of cure, but he knew that cure was not meant for his people.

His people no longer mattered to the aliens, who would move on and leave Venedel behind them, a dead planet save for the solitary shrieks and scratchings of the Ilijah.

The Thane had to be told. He would know how best to fight back. Almost shaking with outrage, Renad crept silently away, heading back to the ship's exit.

Forno had collected several piles of sticks and undergrowth. He had a big pile of firewood from just breaking off twigs and branches from the trees. He'd gnawed through a good deal of bark and now had a collection of flimsy planks that could feasibly be bound together and used to form some kind of primitive dwelling. The prettiest pile was one of broad, green leaves gathered from a grove of bushes. He'd left some of the pale yellow flowers in among them to cheer himself up as he trotted back and forth.

He deposited the latest plank and licked his teeth clean of splinters, heading off to chew another one into shape. He knew he had gathered far more materials than they could possibly need for a temporary shelter, but the simple, mechanical nature of the task was good therapy for his nerves. And it was so peaceful in this glade, so...

'Watch out you idiot!'

Forno heard Arko's voice even as his foot slipped on a patch of vegetation and the ground fell away beneath him. With a cry of alarm Forno scrabbled for something to hold on to, his legs kicking against thin air. His claws sunk deep into the mud, but he couldn't support his own weight. His hands began to furrow through the mud as he slipped further and further down.

Just as he couldn't hold on any longer, Arko reached him from across the glade and dragged him back up by his arms.

Shivering, Forno clutched hold of his saviour – who promptly dumped him down on his backside.

'You berk,' Arko complained, pointing at a ragged hole in the ground, which Forno could now see had been quite obviously disguised with a matting of plants and mud. 'You'd not want one of those where the sun don't shine.'

Rising up from the bottom of the circular pit were several thick sticks, each one sharpened to a horrible point.

Forno winced.

'They like digging their holes round here, don't they,' Arko said, a little more softly.

'They do,' Forno agreed bitterly. 'I hate this planet.' Then he found himself smiling in astonishment as a joke presented itself unbidden. 'It's the pits.'

Arko looked at him in equal surprise. Then he grinned.

‘Forno, are you trying to keep up my morale?’

Forno shrugged. Then he looked at the pit that had nearly swallowed him up and started tittering. Arko joined in. It felt like the first time they’d laughed together in an age.

Abruptly they stopped as a sinister rustling noise started up, the same Forno had heard before. Two dark and spindly shapes stepped into the glade. Flimsy pieces of white gauze fluttered about their skinny bodies like moths that had chewed a hole in the air itself; the creatures’ blue-black skins seemed to absorb the sunlight.

‘What do you suppose *they* are?’ Arko hissed.

Forno stammered and shook. ‘I... I think they’re the things I heard coming out of the temple after that woman.’

Arko frowned. ‘Well, no worries, then, right? She was over the moon to see us.’ He raised his voice to the newcomers.

‘Er... Greetings to you. You come in peace, I take it, right?’

The dark creatures advanced on them silently.

‘Right?’

Spindly jet black arms reached out for them.

12 The Black Death and Old Stories

‘It’s a dead end!’ Tinhar whispered fearfully.

Benny slapped a palm against the packed mud and cursed.

‘This looks more like a kind of rockfall than an actual deliberate end to the tunnel,’ she said, running her fingers up and down the mud pile thoughtfully. She produced her trusty trowel and started digging at the earth blocking their way. ‘Worth a try, I suppose.’

The earth fell away quite loosely nearer the bottom of the mud pile, but Benny didn’t allow herself to hope. Even so, she increased her efforts, tearing away at the mud and shovelling it over her shoulder. Tinhar eventually joined in too, scrabbling at the mud with his fingers. Look at us, Benny thought. Like two prisoners locked in a dungeon for years, finally facing a chance for freedom. We’ve only been stuck here half a day.

‘Look out!’ Benny snapped, dragging Tinhar back as a shower of rock dust fell over her. ‘We must’ve weakened –’

With a ragged cracking noise and the sound of heavy rocks falling, the roof abruptly crashed down about them.

Light splashed in to the tunnel like a bucket of clear water, washing away the darkness. Benny turned triumphantly to Tinhar, who was beaming so brightly and so covered in muck he looked like a fat, cheery mole. She was so delighted she found herself kissing him on the forehead.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ she murmured, wiping the dirt from her lips as she clambered over rocks and mud to stand beneath the circle of clear blue above.

Tinhar made less agile haste to join her. ‘Yes, quickly. The way our luck’s going, the sky will fall in on us next.’

Benny felt something underfoot, and stooped down to see.

‘Well, if it does, it’ll probably impale itself on these first.’

She brandished two thick wooden sticks, each one sharpened to a wicked looking point. ‘We must be in the bottom of a hunting pit. Renad said they were littered all over the forest...’

Then she heard angry voices, and the sounds of a fight. She closed her eyes. ‘Now what?’

As the thin black arm tightened round his neck, Arko felt his head was expanding like a balloon. He struggled fiercely but couldn’t break the creature’s stranglehold. He snapped his jaws open and shut, desperate to draw in air as consciousness sought drowsily to leave him. His eyes fixed on a tiny piece of plastic embedded in that bruise-dark wrist, a shiny speck catching the sunlight as blackness began to fringe his

vision.

And then, at once, he was free and pitching forwards on to his face, his ears roaring with the pressure as he found he could breathe again.

He rolled over and dazedly took in the scene about him.

Starl, wielding one of Forno's lovingly collected sticks, was shouting at the spindly black creature, warning it off. From the way it was holding the back of its head, Starl had clearly been able to do some damage. The other monster was wearing Han's jacket over its head, and while Han struggled to keep the thing in the dark, Forno was raining down largely ineffectual blows upon it.

'The pit,' Arko croaked, rubbing his throat. 'Chuck them down the pit.'

Starl looked uncertainly at him. Arko gestured behind him at the hole in the ground.

The black spindly thing seemed ready to fight again, assuming that crouching stance which had kicked off the whole episode. But with a speed Arko could barely credit, Starl ran up to the creature, spun round gracefully on one foot and then brought up his club, swinging it into the thing's head.

Slender limbs flailed helplessly as the alien toppled backwards into the pit. Then Starl dashed across to Arko's right, to help Han and Forno herd their creature over the edge.

He thought he could hear someone scream...

'Goddess, where did you come from?'

Benny backed hurriedly away from the shadowy figure of the alien that had just dropped in on them, and right into Tinhar who was cowering behind her. As the jet-black being struggled to get to its feet, she stared up into the blue brightness to see if it was about to start raining these things down on them.

'Starl!' Benny yelled in delight.

His grimy but good-looking face was suddenly there looking down at her. At the sight of her, his expression of fierce resolve swiftly melted to amazement and then to alarm.

'Han, Forno, no!'

His warning had clearly come too late. Benny yelped in alarm as a second alien landed heavily alongside its fellow.

'Thanks a bunch!' Benny yelled up at her unlikely persecutors. 'But it's crowded enough down here already!'

'That's a Shik,' Tinhar said hoarsely. 'And look, look at its fingers.'

A Shik? Whatever. Benny noted there were finger joints missing. 'It's been hurt?'

'It belongs to one of the triads! We've got to get out of here!'

Tinhar determinedly dodged round the now standing and swaying

creature, heading for the far side of the pit.

‘Benny!’ Starl shouted. ‘Hold on, we’ll get you out!’

‘Careful, Tinhar!’ Benny shouted. She could see he was making for the wooden rungs lodged into the muddy walls, presumably placed there for the hunter to climb down and retrieve his catch. Tinhar climbed with unexpected swiftness, but the earthfall had clearly weakened the entire area. The rungs dislodged and Tinhar slipped down with a cry of alarm to the bottom of the pit.

Benny tried to hold the dark, sinewy creature back, tried to keep it away from Tinhar. But its fellow seized her ankles in two powerful hands. The first Shik shrugged her off, and she was left kicking and struggling on her back in the mud, trying to pull free. Something hit her shoulder. She looked up to see that Han and Forno were pelting the Shiks ineffectually with stones.

‘Tinhar!’ Han shrieked. Tinhar, get away from it –’

Tinhar screamed. Benny closed her eyes and screamed with him in pain and frustration. At last she broke free, struggled to her aching feet, scooped up a rock, and brought it crashing down on the first Shik’s head.

As it slumped forward, silently, Benny could see from the way Tinhar’s head was lolling on his fat, bruised neck that she was too late.

She rounded on the other Shik, the one that had dragged her off. The dark pits of its eyes stared coldly up at her. At her feet was the wooden spike. She hefted it up and brandished it murderously at the creature.

‘Benny, never mind that thing,’ Starl shouted.

He tossed down a huge pile of thick, gnarled sticks, which landed at her feet. When Arko came into view another load followed.

Benny smacked the Shik round the head with the blunt end of her spike, knocking it senseless. Then she piled up the sticks against the pit wall, making a kind of ramp. Climbing up it, she was high up enough to reach the sleeve of Han’s jacket that Starl was dangling down to her. He and Arko pulled up on it, winching her up to safety.

Benny clambered breathlessly back on to solid ground. Starl spun her round and held her tightly. She couldn’t say a word.

She felt only numb as she took on board that she’d made it out alive, one more time.

She glanced dizzily down. Way below her, Tinhar’s white round face stared up accusingly in sightless terror, a ghastly moon set in a dark muddy sky, surrounded by sprawling shadows.

Wearily, the reunited team made their way back to the mysterious blonde in the clearing. No one spoke. Tinhar’s death, and the news of

Shell, had dampened any joy at the reunion. Forno carried his leaves, lost in thought, and Starl and Han shared the bark slats between them.

‘I’m so sorry about Shell,’ Benny told Arko, but the words sounded pointless and inadequate, even to her, and *she* knew how desperately she meant them.

‘I know you are,’ Arko said quietly. ‘And I know she’d have gone a lot sooner if not for you.’

Benny said nothing, unable to look at him. But she was grateful when Arko took her hand in his paw and gave it a squeeze.

‘I thought I was building that pile of sticks for nothing,’

Forno said sweetly, taking her other hand in his own paw. ‘But I’m so glad it helped you make it back to us.’

Benny managed a weak smile for him.

‘When you’re ready, Benny,’ Starl said. ‘We could do with some catching up.’

Benny nodded, but said nothing.

‘We have to go back for Tinhar,’ Han said. ‘We have to get him out of there.’

Benny wondered numbly if she should apologise for Tinhar’s death too, but Starl got in first. ‘Han, what’s happened is terrible, I know. But we can’t risk going down into that hole to get him out with those two creatures there.’

‘I have to get to him,’ Han insisted.

Starl got a bit heavier. ‘We’ve got other priorities right now than giving Tinhar a proper burial, okay?’

‘Priorities,’ Han snorted. ‘Getting off this miserable shit-heap should be our first priority, but what are you doing about that?’

‘We should all stick together –’ Forno began.

‘Squabbling’s not going to –’ Arko growled back.

‘Pack it in, all of you!’ Benny shouted over both of them.

Everyone stopped and stared at her.

‘That’s better.’

When it became clear Benny had nothing more to add, Starl led them off again towards the boundary of the clearing.

Benny noticed the faintest of smiles on his lips.

‘My flyer was impounded when the Federation started the siege,’ Han said, clearly not about to let the subject go. ‘Happy now?’

‘There’s someone who’s not,’ Starl pointed out.

Benny had been told about the mysterious sleeping woman, but was completely unprepared for actually meeting her face to face. Statuesque, blonde and with picture-perfect features, the woman was probably the most strikingly beautiful person Benny had ever seen. Deciding not to hold that against her, Benny still found there was something about the woman she didn’t like; an unmistakable air of

arrogance. Standing in Starl's coat in the middle of the clearing, she looked like she owned the entire planet and everyone on it.

'What is the meaning of this?' she stormed. 'Where am I? Who are you, and what do you want from me? What have you done with my people?'

'Slow down, slow down,' Benny said, holding up her muddy hands, as much to stem the confused mutterings from her own party as to silence the blonde beauty. 'We've got a few questions for you, too. Why don't you try telling us who you are?'

'My name is Overseer Janrees of Obvion,' the woman said grandly. Benny imagined the woman would feel more at home in a Valkyrie warrior outfit, bronze bra, winged helmet, the works. 'And I repeat, where are my people?'

'You're not on Obvion now, love,' Arko said.

Overseer Janrees fell silent. 'I am well aware of that. Obvion has been ruined for all time.'

'Obvion?' Benny whispered, none the wiser.

'Recolonised and rechristened over 500 years ago,' Starl hissed back. 'It's called something else now.'

'So our little lady here's out of time,' Benny muttered thoughtfully. She remembered the base, Tinhar's awkward explanations.

'Speak aloud if you would speak to me!' Janrees challenged.

'Those plastic valves in your neck and wrist,' Starl said. 'They suggest to me some sort of medical procedure.'

Janrees stared at the one on her wrist. 'You did not release me from the sleep?'

Benny checked bemusedly with the others. 'Uh-uh.'

'Sleep?' Arko questioned.

'Look,' Benny said. 'Seems it's been quite a morning for all of us. Let's make a fire, brew up some nice hot leaf tea or something...' She looked at everyone in turn. 'And then, I think we should tell each other some stories.'

The Thane looked out from his throne of solitude over the courtyard. His people swarmed about over the alien machines dragged back out from the stables – machines that rolled along on wheels, or that flew. The men and women were cleaning them of thick black oil, refamiliarising themselves with controls they never thought they'd be using again. All useless against the threat of the Ilijah, of course, but Mahel was coming to terms with that.

What he wanted now for his people was revenge against the Nishtubi.

'And thus, the Thane of Mahel sought to unite his people in the blood of their alien enemy,' Hoodath read aloud beside him.

‘Sought?’ Mahel queried. ‘That suggests I may not be successful.’

‘...the Thane of Mahel *declared* he would unite the –’

‘I *will* unite the people, Hoodath,’ Mahel stated, losing his temper. ‘I will. The alien technology will wipe the Nishtubi from the face of Venedel.’

‘Like an unpleasant stain, my lord,’ Hoodath agreed hastily, between crossings out and new lines.

The Thane turned back to the view of the courtyard. One figure was buzzing about below like a fly from one spot to another, furiously sorting and settling and motivating others.

‘Look at Chieftain Renad,’ the Thane said, suddenly much calmer. ‘A driven man.’

Hoodath smiled tightly. ‘A man who loves his people and his ruler, I feel sure, my lord.’

‘More importantly, he is a man who hates his enemies. One who will fight them to the death.’ The Thane nodded slowly. ‘I *will* unite the people, Hoodath. Against any and all aliens that mean us harm. And before our last man falls, we shall be victorious.’

Hoodath smiled deferentially. ‘Beautifully and stirringly put, my lord.’

Mahel imagined the blood and gore that would soon stain these machines so much darker than oil and grease, and said nothing more.

It soon became clear that Overseer Janrees of Obvion had quite a tale to tell; one that put mutual commiserations about the hardships endured by the rest of Benny’s party in the shade.

Janrees knew she wasn’t on Obvion – but had no idea that she’d landed up on Venedel.

Nor had she any inkling that she’d become a real life Buck Rogers. Starl had muttered in an aside that he reckoned her earlier, apparently quite euphoric mood could be to do with the influence of the drugs that had kept her alive in cold storage lingering on in her bloodstream once she’d been unhooked. But now, as the implications of her five centuries of sleeping sunk in, Janrees had grown quieter, colder. It was a far more unsettling display than her angry warrior queen bit.

‘So it was the Ilijah that destroyed Obvion,’ Starl said.

‘It was the *Boor* that destroyed us,’ Janrees said, her voice still cold and flat. ‘Those stinking, unintelligible bags of blubber.’

Everyone turned to Forno as he reacted with a loud yelp.

Forno looked round at them all with big innocent eyes.

‘Did... Did they really smell funny too?’

Janrees glared at him. ‘Like perfume on a rotting corpse.’

Benny was put oddly in mind of the strange smell in the temple.

Forno nodded slowly. ‘And they did not talk... coherently?’

Janrees scowled. 'Every Boor's speech translators were specially programmed to confuse and irritate all those he spoke to – particularly the police. Even the most accidental of confessions could be put down to a quirk of the translators.'

Her words were bitter, but Benny thought she detected a glimmer of admiration.

'Why do you ask, Forno?' Han said.

'No reason,' squeaked Forno, looking down at the ground.

'The Boor *destroyed* with no reason,' Janrees went on. 'The Ilijah were simply the tools they used. We would not pay them, and so they ensured our world was overrun. However many we managed to kill, double the number were incubating in every form of life on the planet.'

Benny shuddered. 'But there must've been other worlds you could've turned to for aid, or support...?'

'Accepting charity does not come easy to us,' Janrees said. 'In any case, we had no one to turn to.'

'What about the "stellar police"?' Benny tried.

Janrees looked at her strangely. 'The police could never help us.'

Starl was looking at her oddly too. 'Why do you mention the stellar police?'

'Tinhar said they were the major league law enforcers back then.'

Starl shook his head. 'The stellars were soon subsumed into the fledgling Federation – it was meant to be a system-wide body of law and order to cement the Earth's relations with other worlds.'

'Hence, "Earthlink",' Benny observed.

'The Earthlink Federation had helped to found an organisation that would rehome refugees from planetary disasters,' Janrees went on. 'The only choice my people had was to relocate to a planet considered too hostile to support life.'

'Doesn't sound like much of a choice,' Arko noted.

Janrees shook her head bitterly. 'We were told Kolkakron was to be terraformed in a matter of decades, and that the Federation had plans for dealing with the Boor. My people would be placed in suspended animation for less than fifty years, after which we would step out on to a new world in a brighter, better era.'

'Instead of which, you're asleep for five hundred years and wake up in this dump,' Arko said. 'I'm sorry, pet.'

Janrees did not thank him for his condolences. 'How do I come to be here, if you did not revive me?'

'I'm not sure,' Benny said.

'Those Shik things that attacked us,' Arko remembered. 'The one that attacked me had a wee bit of plastic in its wrist just as you do.'

'Shik?' Janrees echoed. 'You are saying we have been sleeping with

the *Shik*?’

There’s an image, thought Benny.

‘And five hundred years ago was the time of the Shik triads,’

Starl said. ‘It makes sense...’

‘Tinhar mentioned the triads,’ said Benny. ‘So what, the Shik were criminals like the Boor?’

‘The Shik syndicate kept the outer worlds suppressed for over a hundred years,’ Janrees said bitterly.

‘Their hold over the outers is long since broken,’ Starl piped up. ‘And the Boor went to ground long ago too. Organised crime has been all but wiped out.’

‘I think there’s a Boor living in the temple,’ Forno said quickly, cowering from Janrees behind Arko as if expecting to be hit. ‘I smelt him and I heard him. And I think he’s a friend of the Nishtubi,’ he added quietly.

Janrees leapt to her feet. The Boor?’ she thundered, the Queen of Asgard again. ‘*Here?*’

‘Not here,’ Benny said, rising herself in sudden excitement.

‘Over at the temple. The temple that’s been hidden for hundreds of years.’

‘So what are we saying here?’ Arko looked at her.

Benny tried to organise her thoughts. ‘We’re saying that around the time the Federation was struggling to set itself up, desperate to establish a reputation for itself, it badly needed some quick and easy victories over what sounds like a good deal of problems out in this sector. It needed other planets to respect its muscle in order to grow stronger.’

‘So it just dumped every thorn in its flesh down here, on Venedel?’ Starl said, jumping her train of thought. ‘The Boor, the Shik, Janrees’s people?’

‘And god knows who else,’ muttered Arko.

‘Swept its troubles under the carpet,’ Benny suggested. ‘Or rather, adapted the vast storage chambers of an ancient forbidden temple, and put all its troubles on ice. Out of sight and out of mind.’

Janrees said nothing. Benny knew she couldn’t begin to imagine how betrayed, and how helpless, Janrees must feel.

‘But why would they do it? And why here on Venedel?’ Arko wanted to know.

‘I guess they had to set it up somewhere,’ Benny said.

‘And why leave evidence, why not just kill them all instead of placing them in suspended animation or whatever?’

‘The Federation aren’t killers,’ Starl said firmly.

‘If they never intended to wake us,’ Janrees remarked coldly.

‘It is tantamount to murder.’

Benny half-smiled in sympathy. 'They probably convinced themselves they were being humane.'

Forno peeped out from behind Arko. 'But now everyone's waking up... why?'

'Mechanical fault? I don't know. Something must've happened...' Benny tried to concentrate. 'Were the Ilijah being kept in cold storage too? Could they have got loose? Could their ability to grow in a host body have changed while they were sleeping?' It didn't seem likely, she had to admit.

'And what about the Nishtubi?' Arko demanded suddenly.

He seemed oblivious to Benny's frantic wavings to be quiet.

'How do they figure in all this?'

Too late. Janrees stared at him, trembling like she was about to explode. 'You mean the Nishtubi are here as well? Those mouldy stone-hearted imbecilic Boor henchmen are -'

'Yep, the gang's all here,' Benny said. 'Or the *gangs*, anyway.'

But there's something we're missing, something that's not adding up...' An unpleasant thought struck her. 'Oh, Goddess,' she breathed. 'What if that's the real reason for the strength of the Federation blockade, for the referendum, for the threat of a tactical strike against Venedel? The temple's been found. The past is coming to light and they've decided it's time to clear up after themselves once and for all?'

'We need to get out of here,' Forno said miserably.

'We need some answers,' Arko mused.

'We need to get to the temple,' Starl said. 'The... *stratigraphy* Forno uncovered suggests you're right, Benny, that wherever it is you and Tinhar found yourselves, it's focused around there.'

'I agree, let's make for the temple,' Benny said. 'I think an underground bunker could come in very handy in the next little while.' She turned hurriedly towards Han behind her.

'You've been very quiet, Miss Journo. Don't you have any tabloid dirt on the Feds you can -'

But Han had vanished.

'Anyone see where she went?' Benny demanded.

No one had.

'Now, why would she want to leave just as things were getting so interesting?' she wondered aloud.

Han looked about the copse to make sure she was on her own, and to check there were no more Ilijah waiting to spring out at her.

Then she reached inside her top and peeled the secreted communicator strip away from the skin just below her armpit.

The battery was fully charged by her body heat. A good job, too. She was transmitting a long way on full boost.

She pressed her lips against the thin plastic. 'This is Han.'
There was nothing from the strip but a soft, crackling silence.
She tried again.

There was a long pause. 'What do you have to say, Han?'

'It's like you thought, only worse. There are representatives of at least three races walking about down here.'

'And the Boor?'

'I think they must've re-engineered the Ilijah.'

'Re-engineered?'

Han explained tersely all that she'd picked up from the conversation in the clearing. 'There are outsiders here. People that ran the blockade and got through. They've as good as guessed what's gone on here.'

'Much good may it do them. Shortly, the results of an interplanetary referendum will be announced. We will ensure the people of the Earthlink Federation vote overwhelmingly for a nuclear strike to bring Venedel into line. Mahel will be the site of the first bombardment.'

Han felt her mouth drain dry of moisture. 'How soon?' she croaked.

'Within the next few hours, I would imagine. If I was you, I'd get out of there very, very quickly.'

'But I can't, I –'

Han shut up, aware that her connection had been cut. She stared dumbly at the strip in her hand, listened as the static crackled and hissed and undulated. One moment it sounded like the sea, caught in a heatflash, boiling away into space.

Another moment, it sounded like low, gloating laughter.

Trying not to panic, she got her bearings and ran off into the forest, heading for the hunting pit that had become Tinharr's open grave.

13 Totalled Recall

Maddaska and his men were still escorting Boor Bantagel to the temple. Maddaska was trying to remain patient, but the old man was so slow, and did nothing but complain about practically everything.

‘Wait, wait.’ Bantagel held up a shovel-like hand, bringing a halt to his shuffling party, then pointed ahead of him. ‘What’s this?’

Maddaska stared at the coal-black body lying still on the forest floor, as did his men.

‘It’s a Shik,’ Ukka said, not disguising the respect in his voice.

‘Look at them fingers! Original gangster.’

‘I see it be a Shik,’ Bantagel growled, rounding on the Nishtubi. ‘It one of the Shik triumvirate, a leader of men. What the schmuck doing up?’

Maddaska cleared his throat as delicately as he could, but the rasping noise still scared birds from the trees. ‘Perhaps when you animated your own people, you –’

‘Your people wake me up,’ the old Boor snarled, a murderous gleam in his eyes. ‘So I reckons maybe it be you. Now what, you try to make the deal with Shik scum too? You cheat me out the deal?’

Maddaska sighed. ‘The Nishtubi have no ties with the Shik, you know that, Boor Bantagel. We deal with you alone.’

‘Deal? Nishtubi want be partners now. No more the old days.’ Bantagel shook his greasy head.

Suddenly there was an explosion of movement and thick black gore from the Shik’s back. An infant Ilijah burst into the air, screeching. But the screech died as the Boor flicked out two fat fingers and caught it delicately in midair.

He smiled round at the Nishtubi, and waved it in the direction of Putin as if he were going to throw it at him. ‘Still got it, huh? My party piece.’ He glowered at Maddaska and crushed the Ilijah’s neck, before tossing the corpse at Putin’s feet. ‘Party’s over now.’

The Boor trudged off again towards the temple.

Putin looked down at the little corpse. ‘They’re developing at a staggering rate.’

Maddaska nodded. ‘And breeding too,’ he said quietly.

‘Their growth cycle has been massively accelerated.’

‘But that means they’ll die all the quicker,’ Putin said smugly.

‘Doesn’t it?’

Maddaska stared back at him, unsmiling.

The flyers, the battle carts, the chariots, the armoured car – the sum total of the Thane’s unlikely arsenal – were gathered outside the

settlement gates. Alien engines throbbed and growled among crowds of foot soldiers in full war paint sporting bows and arrows and spears – and flame-throwers that worked, this time.

The hour had come for the battle march to commence.

Standing before his people, surveying the strange parade, the Thane wished he could just stay at home and read Hoodath's account of it later. His ceremonial armour was not only ornate and beautiful, it was extremely heavy, and chafed him in all the worst places.

'My people,' he began, his scribe beside him loyally transcribing every word. 'Aliens have sought to use us for their own ends, time and time again. It is time, again, for us to reject their teachings.'

He winced slightly at his repetition of 'time' and 'again', and a stern glance at Hoodath ensured he'd actually said something altogether better. His people stared hard at him, their faces inscrutable, and Mahel swallowed. They were either held rapt by his oration or else they were about to run for it into the forest.

'Renad has told you of the harm inflicted upon us by the Nishtubi.' The Thane gestured at Renad, standing impassive beside him. 'He has told you that our ancient enemies, the Boor, are present here also. We know not what their numbers might be. We know only that together these aliens have unleashed the old Death upon us, and that we must be revenged.' He took a deep breath, raised his voice for the finale. 'As a people, many centuries ago, we vowed that we would never pay the Boor again. Now we must demonstrate our resolve. Now it is the aliens who must pay!'

People raised arms and spears and voices, as a mighty cheer went up. The Thane nodded, smiling as he looked round at the baying throng. He took in the young men who would never grow old, and their loyal wives prepared to die beside them.

Other men, who'd thought themselves grown too old to fight and children, excited and fearful, with no idea what lay ahead of them.

He proceeded to his own flyer. It was the largest and cleanest of the lot. How thoughtful. Nazan got into the driver's seat, staring round at the Thane for a moment with large, fearful eyes. Mahel smiled reassuringly, then felt something nudge his back. It was Hoodath, clambering awkwardly in behind him.

'Hoodath, you're ridiculous,' said the Thane. 'You're going into battle with paper and pen?'

'It would insult my art were I to rely on memory alone to transcribe this momentous event... Our most significant, glorious victory.'

'Hoodath, Hoodath,' the Thane murmured, not unkindly.

'You write down every word I say, and yet you never decipher the meaning of a single one of them.'

Hoodath looked down at his lap, fiddling with his pen. The Thane

sighed and looked up as Renad grimly climbed aboard his own flyer, which had symbols for vengeance and death daubed large all over it in lurid colours.

The Thane took a deep breath and intoned the ancient fighting litany of his tribe. “May the dripping grief in our hearts betrayed catch heavenly light, and may its fire guide us to victory,” He paused – not for any dramatic effect, but because his voice was threatening to catch in his throat. He must betray no weakness now. Not now.

‘Onwards!’

Just before the rousing cheers went up, the Thane caught a whisper of movement, a vibration of the leaves on the trees around them.

Before he could open his mouth to shout a warning the Ilijah were upon them, leaping through the air, bloated and scaly, the size of small calves. Defiant shouting turned to screams of terror. The Ilijah hooked on to men and women with gruesome claws, bit and scratched at them, tugged at the flesh with ghastly big teeth. There were so many of them, and it seemed impossible that death could take anyone so quickly. The flame-throwers weren’t yet primed, and there was no time, no space to ready them. The Thane’s growling, roaring pack of metal animals started backing up, or turning over and throwing off their riders, or bumping into each other as the air grew wet with egg-spray and blood. Men on foot scattered into the forest as fast as they could.

‘That’s right! Onwards, I said!’ the Thane shouted, as Renad led the motorised charge away, his flyer roaring into angry life.

‘Quickly!’

Hoodath clutched on to the Thane like a small child as their flyer lurched into uncertain flight. A few followed after them, but it was clear that, inexperienced in piloting the machines, weakened by hunger, crushed by despair, his people were to be massacred.

The Thane looked away, but before he did so he saw still more Ilijah leaping up at the settlement gates. Having scented the weak, skinny livestock inside, he knew the creatures would consume any choice morsels in their paths and soak in living death anything else that moved, multiplying their number, spreading their plague.

Suddenly the flyer pitched to the left, and Nazan screamed.

An Ilijah was attached to his face, gnarled legs perched upon his shoulders, twisting round his head. The Thane gripped his seat and Hoodath held on to him. Transfixed, Mahel watched as the lizard creature pulled open Nazan’s mouth and squirted the familiar stream of sticky egg-fluid right down his throat.

Nazan gagged and gargled, and the flyer smashed into a tree.

The Thane shook his head, but it was too full of screams and horrors for him to focus on anything else. He was only dimly aware of

the Ilijah leaping for his face, claws outstretched, teeth gruesomely bared.

Han crept towards the pit.

The clearing was gloomy. Massive cotton-wool clouds were swabbing the bright sky as if to soothe it, and to protect Venedel's people from the sight of the fighter fleet that would soon be massing in the blue.

There wasn't a sound. Nothing moved or stirred in the pit.

Taking a deep breath, Han steeled herself to peer inside.

Tinhar's naked corpse was twisted in one corner, and Han felt her stomach flop and shift as if balking at the sight of him. His clothes were ripped and strewn about the place – clearly they'd been searched thoroughly.

Both the Shik had gone.

Han looked round her, fearfully, her heart sinking. From the churned up mud around the pit edge, and from mangled markings in the muddy walls, it wasn't hard to guess that the Shik had climbed up and out. Bracing herself, she scrambled down into the depths, using their footholds as much as she could.

Tinhar's skin was cold, his body hard and not easy to shift.

Han checked it as clinically as she could, but she already knew the recall device was missing. They'd taken it. And if she couldn't stop them in time, they'd take her only chance of getting away from here.

With a surge of desperation, Han climbed out of the pit as quickly as she could and started looking about for footprints, for any signs of a trail. Only half-convinced she'd found one at all, she moved off in a crouching run.

Benny, Arko and Forno were travelling through the forest as quickly as they dared. Benny was sorely tempted just to yell out Han's name, but with the forests as full of surprises as they were... A stumbling half-hearted silent search party would just have to do the best it could. If she didn't show up, they couldn't waste too much time looking for her. First, Benny wanted some answers, then she wanted to get the hell out of here before any bombs started dropping.

'Your super-snouts not picking up a trail?' Benny called.

'Nothing yet,' Arko said. 'I reckon Starl's right. I reckon she'll have gone back to the pit for whatever she wants with Tinhar. He'll find her.'

'He should've taken you or Forno with him,' Benny muttered sourly.

'Thanks,' Arko replied, with a smile.

'He wanted you to stay with us so we can protect you,' Forno added. 'Benny, I think he likes you.'

'Well, there's a bombshell,' Arko muttered.

Benny was irritated to feel herself blush slightly. 'There have been too many bombshells dropped round here, lately,' she said, 'and that's before the Federation gets started.'

'Would you be including our blonde bombshell among them?' Arko inquired with mock innocence.

'I wouldn't mind dropping her,' said Benny. She checked her compass. 'You know, I don't think we can be far from the temple now...'

'Shh!' Arko was sniffing the air. 'Shik,' he said. 'Shik nearby.'

Benny had a sniff. 'I can't smell a thing.'

'It's a kind of deadness in the air,' Arko said, and Forno nodded fervently.

Benny moved up to a thicket of trees and peered through.

With a tingle of fear and anger she saw the two dark, spindly figures ahead of her, and remembered them close up in the pit, the hard, oily texture of their skin, the hollows of their shadowy eyes. One of them held some kind of device that was emitting a high-pitched beeping noise, and was waving it in front of him like you would a torch in the dark, clearly moving forward in the direction it registered.

Cautiously, Benny and the Waskas followed them along a path they all soon began to recognise.

'It's leading them to the temple,' Arko observed.

Benny shook her head. 'No – they came from the temple, why would they need some fancy device to get back to it?'

'I wonder where they found it?' Forno chipped in.

As they emerged from the canopy of trees and saw the vast, conical temple rising up from the lowlands ahead of them, Benny imagined she saw Tinhar's face looking up at her again.

And then the beeping of the Shik's device reached a still higher pitch. A large patch of air beside the temple began to shimmer and the vegetation around it began to curl back as if tugged by fingers of black smoke. Then they ignited into thick flames as a small spaceship seemed to leap out of a hole in midair in the blink of an eye.

The Shik turned to each other and hissed in triumph.

'Oh, Han,' Benny muttered. 'You must've got there too late, girl...'

Han heard the noise of rushing air, like the gurgle of a foamy tide dragging itself back into the sea, and her heart quickened.

She charged recklessly through the forest, snapping twigs underfoot and snagging her clothes on thorns and branches.

Then she saw it up ahead of her. Small and serviceable, its metal plates smoking from the friction of phasing back into existence here, was the shuttle that would take her away from all this. She wanted to run to it now, but slunk back into cover at the sight of the two Shik

approaching some way ahead of her, black slit mouths stretched wide in hateful satisfaction.

Suddenly there was a noise beside her. She looked up, already knowing she had not time to run, and yelped as something strong and powerful piled into the side of her and brought her down. She struggled, kicking and punching, but it was no good.

Starl had tackled her to the floor and soon she was held tight. Behind him, Janrees was looking down at her with disdain.

‘So,’ Starl said, panting from his sprint across to her. ‘Got yourself a nice way off-world after all, eh?’

‘It’s Tinhar’s,’ she muttered fiercely, squirming in his grip. ‘I knew he had a way off-world, I just had to get to it.’

‘Well, well. So, old Tinhar wasn’t what he seemed,’ Starl said understandingly. ‘And what about you?’

‘I’m a journalist, I told you.’

Starl brought his face closer to her own. ‘You have a gift for twisting the facts, certainly, but I’d say there was a part of the story here you’re holding on to. Such as how a two-bit scientist like Tinhar would have access to a ship with matter-phasing technology.’

Han sneered defiantly at him, ‘A good expense account.’

‘We need that ship,’ Starl said. ‘If only to get a warning out...’

‘A warning?’ Janrees questioned sharply. ‘Who do you plan to warn, Starl?’

‘There are innocents here,’ he answered lightly. ‘The Venedelans aren’t at fault, and the Federation needs to know that.’

‘The Federation knows full well already,’ Han jeered. ‘And you’re a fool if you trust that bitch. You don’t know what she is.’ ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Starl asked Han.

‘Enough of this idiocy,’ Janrees said. ‘The Shik scum will not have that ship.’

So saying, she burst from their hiding place and ran screaming towards the dark figures now only metres away from the still-steaming ship.

‘Here we go, then,’ Benny muttered as Janrees’s war cry echoed around the forest. She tried out a special scream of her own, half Tarzan, half tone-deaf tomcat. It sounded awful but it felt pretty good.

She reached the nearest Shik, who was reeling in surprise from this sudden onslaught of noise, and swung her fist into his face. He fell silently, rolled over and was suddenly on his feet again, crouched in a fighting stance.

Janrees was knocking the hell out of her Shik, and Benny swore she could almost feel five hundred years of frustration going into every blow. Arko tackled Benny’s Shik next, grappling him to the ground,

growning, but already he was losing his grip on the thing.

‘Forno, help us!’ Benny cried, wading in, trying to get a clear aim for another blow.

But suddenly Janrees cried out. Her Shik had fainted back from her attack and then launched himself at her legs, knocking her down. Now he had rolled round behind her and was strangling Janrees with her own hair. She gasped and gurgled, her porcelain complexion beginning to blush red.

Benny paused for a moment, uncertain who to help.

Starl struggled to free himself from Han’s grip. He’d made to follow Janrees but Han had grabbed him round the neck and pulled him back.

‘Listen to me, you idiot,’ she muttered into his ear. ‘Let them fight. Let them kill each other if they want to. There’re too many of us to get away, so they’re dead already. Whereas we can sneak on board and be away from here before they’ve even realised.’

Starl went limp in her arms as the implications sank in.

He struggled round in Han’s grip, looked into her fierce brown almond eyes, recognised something of himself in them.

Her lips twitched in an apology for a smile. ‘It makes sense and you know it.’

Starl slapped Han hard with the back of his hand and knocked her out cold. Then he ran to join the others.

Benny cursed herself for hesitating. Arko had been unable to hold on to the Shik he’d tackled, and by the time she’d prised one gnarled, ebony arm away from Janrees’s neck, the Shik was free again. It smashed its hand against the back of her head.

She heard Starl shouting her name, looked up, dazed, and saw his blurring form running to help her.

‘They’ve won,’ Arko muttered, helping the groggy Janrees to sit down beside Benny on the ground... ‘They’ve got the ship!’

‘No!’

Benny peered through the steam of the retro rockets as the Shik prepared to blast off from the planet surface, and discerned Han wreathed in the thick smoke, choking and shouting at the ship. She skirted the flaming engines and started banging on the side of the shuttle, as if demanding to be let in.

‘Get away from there you little idiot!’ Starl shouted.

One side of the shuttle lurched a little from the ground. Han ran over to join them as the smoke from the retros got thicker and whiter, and the whining of the engines grew louder and deeper. Benny could see blood trickling from the girl’s split lip, and glanced at Starl. He simply shrugged, his face impassive.

‘Will they be able to fly that thing?’ Benny asked him.

‘A child could pilot one of those,’ Starl said. ‘Controls are almost entirely automatic. It’s a ship meant for idiots.’

‘And here she is now,’ Benny said as Han fell to her knees beside her. ‘So the flight controls are basic, but matter-phasing technology? That’s a bit special, isn’t it?’

‘It’s been mentioned,’ Starl said. ‘She’s not very forthcoming.’

‘It’s the same technology the Nishtubi were using when we hit them in orbit?’ Benny hazarded.

‘Are you working for the Nishtubi?’ Arko demanded.

Han shot him a spiteful glance and wiped the blood from her mouth.

‘We should get away from here,’ Forno squeaked. ‘We don’t know how big an area will burn up when the ship takes off.’

‘Good point, Forno,’ Benny said. ‘Come on, the temple!’

The retros whipped up a furious smoky gale in the clearing, blowing leaves and dirt and debris all around. Eyes watering, Benny weaved a path towards the cold dark shelter of the temple entrance, leading the others on. Everyone was entirely focused on simply getting away from the smoke, the heat, the confusion.

And so they practically ran into the two Nishtubi guards, standing like deadly statues in the swirling smog.

‘You again?’ a low voice snarled.

‘We surrender,’ Starl said instantly. ‘But can you hold us prisoner in the Temple? Things might be getting a little hot round here.’

‘No surrender,’ the biggest Nishtubi said. ‘Your rats knocked me out before. I’m going to pay them back.’ He smiled at Benny. ‘But I think I’ll get started with you.’

Forno whimpered. Benny felt the gun push against her head.

She closed her eyes.

14 History's Lesson

So, when Han's shuttle exploded, Benny never saw a thing.

The Shockwave knocked all of them off their feet, and the noise rang and stung in their ears. Falling on to her back, Benny saw the fireball rise above the broiling clouds of thick exhaust, which smoked and trailed away like a time-lapse recording of some terrible storm played at speed.

The Nishtubi guards, facing the blast, were rolling on the floor with their hands over their eyes, Janrees picked up one of their discarded guns and casually shot both of them.

'You've killed them,' Benny said, shocked.

Janrees simply nodded in satisfaction.

'Let's put it on stun now, shall we?' Arko said, quietly, Janrees's hands lingered on the gun for a few seconds, but then she gave it up, and walked away into the smoke.

'How did the Shik manage to blow themselves up?' Benny wondered.

'Booby-trapped,' Starl muttered. 'Han, you and Tinhar were never meant to leave here.'

'No,' Han whispered, tears glistening in her almond eyes.

'No, it has to be a mistake.'

'Who are you working for?' Starl demanded, with an edge to his voice that Benny hadn't yet heard. Suddenly he pulled savagely on her long black hair, making her yelp with pain. 'I said, who are you working for?'

'Starl, what are you playing at?' Benny asked, slapping his hand away from Han's hair.

'Stay out of this, Benny,' Starl said, grabbing Han by the scruff of her neck. 'You're Federation, aren't you. *Shadow* Federation. There's stuff I need to know. Now.'

'What are you talking about?' Benny almost laughed.

'Shadow Federation? You're coming on like some half-arsed secret agent type, who's...' She trailed away as she saw something furtive and sorry in his eyes.

Click.

'Oh. Oh, okay. Terrific.'

'Am I missing something here?' Arko rumbled.

'Well, Starl?' Benny said, rounding on him, her voice growing louder, angrier. 'What's suddenly giving me the impression you might just be a teensy bit more than a pilot down on your luck and needing a job in a hurry, huh?'

Starl looked more uncomfortable than Han did still in his grip.

‘There’s no time for this, Benny.’

‘We’re bloody well making time!’ Benny shouted.

‘Benny!’ Forno said, more urgently. ‘I think we...’

‘You no making no more time,’ came a new voice, low and gravelly. Benny looked up sharply, and gasped with nausea as a sickly-sweet aroma stuck in her nostrils. A massive pile of blubber with a face like leftover curry was peering malevolently down at her with bright beady eyes. Behind it, General Maddaska stood gloating with his gang of armed Nishtubi.

‘No, no more,’ the hideous figure went on smugly. ‘Your time just run out.’

‘You...’ hissed Janrees, and the hatred in her voice gave Benny her biggest clue as to who was standing before her, and that their troubles had just got a lot worse.

‘Uh-huh. Me, Janrees.’ He pointed at Arko. ‘Drop the gun, rat-face.’ His eyes narrowed as he surveyed them with the lofty, critical eye of a creature that has known power all its life. ‘Look at you all. A disgrace. A disgrace to my temple.’

‘*Your* temple?’ Arko echoed incredulously.

‘To my sacred legacy,’ The hideous creature nodded with a fat, patronising smile, as if teasing them. ‘What up, think I can’t have Argian war gods in my pocket too?’

‘You’re a Boor?’ Starl asked uncertainly.

The creature nodded smugly and Benny felt anger twist her insides at how many people had died here because of his actions.

‘High Boor Bantagel,’ Janrees confirmed, her eyes never leaving those twinkling tiny beads of light in the cold, dark face. ‘The oldest, biggest and foulest of them all.’

Bantagel shrugged modestly. ‘I been looking forward to waking you up, sister.’

‘I, on the other hand,’ Maddaska said gravely to Benny, ‘had not expected to see you or your friends again. You really are most irritating.’

‘I don’t mean to be rude, but you’ve come at a really bad time,’ Benny said. ‘Don’t suppose you could call back later, could you?’

Suddenly, the woods around them seemed to come alive with movement. Maddaska, like everyone else, turned automatically to witness masses of hissing, screeching Ilijah rampaging towards them, squirting gallons of sticky egg-fluid from needle-toothed mouths.

‘Run for it!’ Benny shouted, but her friends had already started disappearing inside the temple.

Maddaska turned back to the woman and her friends and fired off a couple of scorching shots, missing one of the furry beasts by inches,

liquifying instead chunks of the ancient stone.

'Leave off the firing,' Bantagel insisted. 'You got no sense of history? Where they gonna go? Inside's my turf.' He chuckled at the sight of the Ilijah. 'Now I get too many samples, huh? These babies. You arranging this for me, huh?'

The Ilijah jostled each other as they formed a circle around Maddaska's group, each pair of shining eyes sizing them up.

'All right, this lot are big enough to cause us needless aggravation,' Maddaska said warily. 'Let's get after those intruders. Inside.'

'There's so many of them,' Putin said wonderingly, lost in the sight. 'And they've changed so much, grown so large...'

Ukka turned to Maddaska, looking pale and sweaty. 'But they can't hurt us, right?'

'Of course they can't,' Maddaska said, bundling him into the darkness of the passage.

Of course, his voice seemed to echo in his head. But as he caught a last sight of the teeming forest through a crack in the heavy stone doors, he couldn't help feeling that the rasping, scraping noise that came with the Ilijah wasn't after all the rubbing of tongue against teeth. It was more like a kind of deranged, savage laughter.

Mildly disturbed, Maddaska pushed past his men to Bantagel.

'Will you take the Ilijah and start working on the way to destroy them now?'

Bantagel's eyes were like glow-worms in his twisted face, his expression unhappy. 'Reckon I better had. I'll check the vidcasts too, for the bombings. No knowing what time we got left here.' He hefted the box. 'You such a schmuck, Maddaska.'

You spend so long bringing this babies to me, I could just been taking my own from outside.' He twisted a small, misshapen piece of rock and an invisible door slid open to reveal a corridor, softly glowing blue. 'You track the intruders. See if you can be killing them before the bombs fall, huh?'

Maddaska stared evilly after him. Then he yelled, his words echoing madly round the rock walls, propelling his men forward into the darkness. 'What are you waiting for, you fools! Get after them!'

The Thane had barely had time to scream before his throat had been torn open and the Ilijah was guzzling at his blood. He felt another knifing with its nails at his leg, slicing flesh from the bone. The creatures knew nothing of his majesty. He had not been chosen to act as a larder. Merely as fuel.

His vision clouded as the Ilijah at his neck raised its gory head as if to laugh at him. But then strong hands yanked it away and twisted its neck, wringing the life from it like blood from a sponge. The sharp

needles at his leg were kicked away, and the fierce red face of Renad swam into view.

‘My lord,’ he whispered reverently. ‘My lord, you are saved.’

The screams of the desperate and the dying slowly started to fade, and the Thane knew only blackness then, a soft, cold, dark blanket settling over him like a covering of snow. He lay under it for some time, the real world impossibly distant.

Tediously, he somehow found himself back again, laid out like a corpse on soft grass. There was a fierce, clogged sort of throbbing in his ears, which he deduced eventually was just the stupid, insolent engine roar of the few remaining alien machines. He opened his eyes to see. Dead-eyed faces stared back at him from behind plastic shields, knuckles white, fingers locked round the steering bars.

There seemed so few left.

He coughed, and felt fluid flood past his lips. A coarse bandage was wrapped round his neck, a noose of cloth. His left leg felt like it was on fire. He struggled to see, and realised that if it was, it was burning somewhere else. Below his knee was nothing but a stump swaddled in skins and furs.

He lay back, let the sun burn into his eyes, hoping it could boil out any ability to feel that might be left inside him. He was ruined. Rescued, dragged from the massacre, and for what. To lead a final suicide charge of whoever was left standing, hopping on his one good leg?

A shadow fell over him, blocking the blinding light. From the sound of the strong breathing, from the smell of the sweat, he knew it was Renad, his idiot saviour.

‘Nazan,’ Mahel croaked feebly, his mouth stinging with the rich iron tang of his blood. ‘Nazan, he...’

‘Nazan is dead,’ Renad said softly. ‘I have saved him from the hatchlings he would carry.’

Mahel glanced at the still bloody knife swinging by Renad’s side, wondered if the same blade had taken his leg. Then another shadow fell over his ruined body, a most familiar frame.

‘What will you write about this, Hoodath?’ the Thane asked softly. ‘How will you glorify this hideous, monstrous defeat?’

‘It never happened,’ Hoodath whispered, his voice so fragile it could break on a single harsh syllable. ‘I’ll make it so it never happened. And you, my lord, well...’

‘Me?’ Mahel shook his head a fraction, staring sadly up at his life-long companion. After this... his work suddenly seemed so misguided.

‘If just a single man lives on after this day is done,’ the Thane said slowly, ‘then the truth will out. Our careful concoction of history will be a flat, stale draught, Hoodath.’

‘Words outlive all, my lord,’ the scribe whispered fervently.

The Thane almost smiled, glanced up at Renad. ‘No, Hoodath. It is the spirit of our people that shall outlive all.’

Hoodath stared at him in horror. What will you do, Mahel imagined himself saying to his stuffy, silly friend as the shadows lying over him got thicker, heavier, blotting out the sky and the sunlight. What will you do with your life, now that I am dead?

With your final paragraph of our history, now that we are *all* dead?

In the dark, the only thing Mahel was aware of was the sound of throbbing, alien engines, a pounding heartbeat so much stronger than his own. Gradually it began to fade to peace, as if his clanking armada were rattling on through the forest, out of earshot now, seeking out a final destiny.

Hoodath fell to the ground, his body wracked with sobs, and pressed a kiss against his Thane’s dead lips. The thick, bristling moustache itched at his skin as if in protest, but he barely noticed.

‘Leave him.’

It was Renad’s voice. Through his tears, Hoodath looked up and saw the fierce resolve set in the chieftain’s face.

‘The Thane of Mahel is dead. I am the leader now,’ he shouted at the stunned, silent men surrounding them. ‘We can delay no longer. The Ilijah will soon come for us again. Before we die, the aliens must lie in pieces before us.’

After exchanging brief looks of wonder, a ragged cheer went up among the men. Fools – so keen and ready to die, and for a philistine like Renad! But he had been popular all his life, a hero, passionate about the people and dedicated to the preservation of their old way of life, no matter what the cost.

Whereas Hoodath, locked away in his rooms with his books, flouting his privileges and living under the Thane’s protective wing...

‘You will journey on with the foot soldiers now, Hoodath,’

Renad said.

‘With the soldiers?’ Hoodath said nervously, still on his knees.

‘I am no warrior, Renad.’

‘No,’ the chieftain said, and there was no mistaking the disdain in his voice. ‘There we agree.’

‘I will record the battle for posterity,’ Hoodath said, pushing his glasses back on his nose, attempting his old, officious tone.

‘You will travel on, Hoodath,’ Renad repeated, his voice low with warning, ‘with the foot soldiers.’

Hoodath looked beseechingly down at his Thane’s mangled body, willing him to come back to life, to punish Renad for asserting his new authority in such a callous way. But the Thane lay silent, and the

history of Mahel seemed to weigh as much as his corpse in Hoodath's arms.

He stumbled over to the foot soldiers, who studied him critically. His cheeks burned with blushes even as his eyes burned with tears as Renad ordered them to march on.

'Goddess, did you see the size of them?' Benny panted, leaning against the cold, rough stone of the passage wall. They'd covered quite some distance in the pitch blackness. Benny hadn't recalled any low doorways or ledges from the last time she was here, but running blind at full pelt was still a horrible experience.

Janrees's voice floated eerily out of the darkness. 'They will tear us apart when they get to us.'

'And if they don't, the Nishtubi will, thanks to your trigger-happy finger,' Arko grumbled.

'They'd have killed us anyway,' Starl said. 'You can depend on that.'

'Han included,' Benny nodded. 'Not a Nishtubi agent then.'

Starl turned, making ready to go off into the darkness.

'Come on, we must keep moving.'

'And *you* must keep talking,' Benny said.

'Later. When we reach a safe point.'

'Great,' Benny said. 'Very convenient for you. The chances of reaching a safe point in here are –'

'Isn't there a chance the Ilijah will kill the Nishtubi?' Forno twittered hopefully, cutting across her.

'Their skin is hard as stone,' Janrees said. 'Normal Ilijah would barely scratch them, but when they're that size...'

Suddenly a sickly yellow light leaked into the tunnel. There was a panicked jostling as everyone tried to work out where it was coming from.

'It's all right, it's just me,' Forno said, his kind, furry face looking almost sinister lit from below. 'It's a Nishtubi torch, I took it from their campsite.'

'Well,' Benny said, 'if the Nishtubi can't be hurt by those things they'll be straight after us.'

'I can hear the doors,' Arko said, one ear pointing almost straight up at the ceiling. They're opening.'

Forno looked aghast. 'The Boor, the Nishtubi, they're all coming for us!'

'We have to press on,' Starl said, taking the torch from Forno.

'Benny, that apparition we saw, fake or not...'

Janrees pushed Han forwards. 'Make her go first.'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you,' Han spat. Starl grabbed hold of her arm, clearly not about to let her go anywhere, and she turned to

Benny. 'If you had any sense you'd dump *her* now.'

'I don't think I can stop her tagging along even if I wanted to,' Benny said guardedly.

Janrees glared loftily at Benny, then turned on her heel. 'I will watch to see if they are coming for us.'

Han twisted in Starl's grip as Janrees walked away and was swallowed up by the darkness. 'She'll be the death of all of you!'

'Wonderful,' Arko muttered. 'Another contender for bringing us down.'

'Care to back that up?' Benny inquired of Han. 'Are you "Shadow Federation"?''

Han said nothing but looked sullenly down at the floor.

'Goddess, is *no one* what they seem to be round here?'

Starl pushed past her brusquely, dragging Han along with him. 'We move on. Now, before we lose our head start.'

'And our heads along with it,' grumbled Arko.

They pressed on into the gloom, Starl leading with his torch.

Benny took in countless ornate pictograms daubed on the rock, telling a similar story to those carved into the temple walls outside. The ancient Gods of the Underworld with their giant eyes, feasting on the weak and spineless souls of the damned... One growing bigger and stronger than the others, the others uniting against him in an enormous battle... it was an old, old story, mirrored in a hundred other myths and legends.

Except this one seemed a little different.

'Hurry up, Benny,' Starl said urgently.

'No, wait.' Benny was becoming more and more engrossed.

'You wanted to know what happened next in the story of the underworld gods, didn't you, back outside the temple?'

Starl almost laughed. 'We actually have one or two more pressing problems than reading some old fairy stories.'

'I'll tell you what happened.' She marched along, peering at the walls intently. 'The biggest god defeated all the others.'

Never mind that they had assembled greater numbers against him, he overpowered them and put them to sleep...' She moved on down the corridor, gesturing at each collection of figures. 'When they awoke they'd forgotten their earlier animosity and served him loyally as the one true God of the Underworld...' She turned to Starl, and to Han and Arko beside him. 'Well, don't you see?'

'What?' Starl was clearly losing his patience rapidly.

'This place!' Benny almost shouted, and Arko shushed her furiously. 'We know the Federation built a facility here, but think of the people it was designed for! The Shik, the Nishtubi, the Boor... and hundreds of years ago, by all accounts, you could probably call them...'

Starl's expression of annoyance melted into disbelief. '...The gods of the underworld!'

'The *criminal* underworld!' Benny stared around at them all.

'Think of Bantagel's arrogance, that guff he was spouting about this being his temple. And if the Federation was weak while the crime lords were strong...'

'Yes...' Starl turned to Han and shoved her back against the wall. The Federation couldn't put all those troublemakers on ice by themselves, could they?' he said, advancing threateningly. The Boor helped them out, under contract!'

'A mutually beneficial arrangement.' Benny pushed him out of the way, looking quizzically at Han, hoping to confirm her theory. 'So what was the deal? Did Bantagel have the Federation in his pocket way back then? Why would he agree to put his own people out of the picture here too?'

Still, Han said nothing.

'Be kind to yourself,' Starl said. 'What do you owe them? The Shadow Federation would've killed you if you'd taken off in that shuttle. As it is, they'll think you're dead. And if you show up on any Federated world, you soon will be. You think they'll tolerate a loose end like you?'

'What is this Shadow Federation?' Benny wanted to know.

'Corrupt elements,' Starl answered. 'The Earthlink's rotten core.'

'Well, what can you offer me?' Han muttered.

'If we can get out of here...' Starl considered. 'Sanctuary. Protection. If you know enough to be our expert witness –'

'Our?' Benny inquired, arms folded. 'Tell me who you are, Starl, before I knee you in the groin a hell of a lot harder.'

Starl cast a meaningful glance behind them at invisible pursuers.

'Unless I'm very much mistaken, we'll be coming up against that projection again when we round the corner,' Benny said angrily. 'So, just in case there's not a next time...'

Starl seemed to realise he wasn't going to get much further anyway unless he came clean. 'All right. I'm Federation too. An agent for the Special Internal Investigations Unit, we're on the side of the angels. We've known about corruption in the Earthlink structure at the highest levels for some time, but only when the temple was discovered did our suspects start getting jittery.'

Benny waved all that aside for a moment. 'But you were on Pan Leica, you had a ship...'

'I've been in deep cover for eight years. I've *been* Starl Stanmore, been that pilot... as a cover story it's perfect for getting me places I need to go unobtrusively.'

'And taking a bunch of archaeologists to Venedel was another good

cover story, right?' Benny wasn't sure if she should be angry or impressed.

'Exactly. I couldn't just come clean. Venedel might've been a dead end, and I couldn't risk my persona for nothing.'

'So that old man you were sat with in *Bar Bolostophus*...'

'Was my placer, yes.' Starl looked at her thoughtfully.

'Making sure my new ship had the necessary modifications.'

'That's why the *New Dawn* was in dock,' Arko realised.

Starl nodded. 'Of course, it didn't end up quite as unobtrusive an exit as I would've liked.'

'Nor an arrival here that was up to much either. But hey, you had me fooled.'

'I'm sorry, Benny,' Starl murmured.

Benny laughed it off. 'I bet you say that to all your dupes.'

Starl's eyes continued to stare into her own. 'You're the first to know.'

'I knew you weren't what you seemed,' Han sneered. 'You knew way too much.'

'And you acted way too dumb,' Starl countered. 'So tell us more.'

'Yeah,' Arko chipped in dryly. 'It's a real show.'

'The information won't help you,' Han said. 'The corruption is too widespread, we're aware of your paltry little secret investigations unit. You've never come anywhere close.'

'Until now,' Starl said. 'So start talking.'

Han sighed. 'I don't know everything.'

'You must be well-trusted to be here at all.'

'I've been in their pay all my life. My family have been party to the corruption for generations.'

'No choice? Poor little Han,' Starl tutted. 'Get on with it.'

Han looked defiantly at him. 'The Boor were losing their hold on the sector. There was too much opposition in other gangs and triads. So the original agreement with the Federation was that the Boor would go to ground for thirty years until the heat was off and then come back to operate under Federation protection. The High Boor would revive the leaders of the other criminal syndicates and only bring back their people once they'd sworn loyalty to him.'

'A supermafia,' Starl breathed. 'Imagine the power.'

'Bantagel must've found out about the place when he was extorting every penny he could get from the natives here,' Han supposed.

'Gods of the Underworld. Big joke,' Arko said. 'With a face like that, I guess you'd have to have a sense of humour.'

'An ideal hiding place, too, short term,' Starl said. 'Even if it was uncovered during the thirty years, a temple excavation would take some time, right?'

'Right,' Benny confirmed. 'Unless you're from the Nishtubi Archaeological Society, of course.'

'That euphoria Janrees had upon awakening...' Arko mused.

'To help them come round to the Boor's way of thinking?'

Benny considered, looking round for Janrees but not seeing her or Forno. They must still be following on. 'Makes sense. Go on, Han. What made the Boor think he could trust the Federation?'

'He had dirt on practically everyone in power, and on the Federation itself. The Boor were financing Earthlink activities on dozens of civilised worlds.' Han glared at Starl. The Federation wouldn't exist at all without the Boor's original funding.'

'I'm sure I'm duly grateful,' Starl said mockingly. 'So he thought the Feds would keep their side of the bargain?'

'The Nishtubi were paid well to ensure resuscitation took place as planned,' Han explained. 'But the Federation grew faster, more powerful, than the Boor ever imagined.'

Benny nodded. 'And they paid the Nishtubi better.'

'It was easy. The corrupt high-ups that the Boor could've exposed were considered too great a risk by the young pretenders and were killed off. And they let the Nishtubi continue operating, running minor contraband rackets, laundering money... made them little more than odd-job men for Federation high-ups.'

'No glamour in that,' Benny noted. 'Hence the likes of General Maddaska wanting a taste of old glories. He must've found out about the original plan.'

'And set it in action only five hundred years late,' Arko concluded. 'Typical Nishtubi efficiency.'

'Except this place is old now, going wrong,' Benny said. 'The air ducts were royally screwed when Tinhar and I were caught inside them.'

'The damage doesn't seem to have spread here yet,' Arko observed.

Starl wasn't listening, lost in thought. 'We always knew it.'

The Earthlink Federation... corrupt from the start.' He shook his head. 'I'll want names from you, Han. Any files, or information, Evidence.'

'They're too powerful,' Han said wearily. 'You'll never bring them down.'

'We'll see.'

'No we won't.' Han's eyes flashed. 'They're rigging the result of a referendum, and this patch of the planet will end up blown to kingdom come!'

Benny looked at Starl. 'They can do that?'

Starl looked suddenly pale, even given the sickly light from the dying torch. That was answer enough for Benny. 'So much for the

good guys,' she sighed. 'How long have we got?'

Han shrugged. 'We'll know soon enough.'

'When we're vaporised?' Benny said.

Starl shook his head. 'Any Federation bombardment begins with a final-warning strike, with two warheads detonated in the atmosphere. It's a last chance for the planet to surrender.'

'Which it won't do, and which, if you're right, wouldn't be accepted anyway,' Benny concluded.

'And the full bombardment will follow not long after,' Han added.

'Nice to know what's coming,' said Benny.

Then a sudden, horrible thought struck her.

'Wait just a minute,' she said. 'If this place is full of so-called gods of the underworld... What about Janrees's sob story about Obvion?'

Han laughed. 'I tried to tell you,' she said. 'Janrees oversaw one of the nastiest crime syndicates going. Her sob story is true all right – the Law wouldn't help them because they wanted her put away by any means necessary. They just sat back and spun her that rubbish about the terraforming organisation that could rehome her people.'

Benny looked around again to check Janrees hadn't come back. 'But there can't be a whole planet's population here?'

Han half-smiled. 'There isn't. Bantagel would've saved the criminal elements and let the Ilijah kill everyone else.'

Benny looked at her, appalled. 'I don't believe it.'

'We probably should,' Starl said grimly. 'Where is she anyway?'

'And where's Forno?' Arko said, marching back down the corridor to see.

But there was no sign of either of them, anywhere to be seen.

15 Tremors

‘They can’t be far now,’ Maddaska said.

Putin agreed. ‘Perhaps the projection’s got them.’

‘They’ve come across that before, they’ll be wary,’ Maddaska answered. ‘Even if it’s killed some of them, I doubt if it’s got them all. Bantagel said it wasn’t designed to destroy large numbers, just to kill or scare off any nosy natives who might wander in.’

‘I have to rest,’ Ukka moaned abruptly.

‘Keeping you up, are we, Sergeant Ukka?’ Maddaska demanded sarcastically.

‘I mean it, sir.’

Putin shone his torch in Ukka’s face, and Maddaska frowned.

Ukka looked pale and feverish, his dreadlocks plastered to his clammy forehead.

There were vivid lesions on his grey skin, and he was clutching his stomach.

‘No...’ muttered Maddaska, backing away. ‘Putin, kill him.’

Putin stared at his General in surprise. ‘Sir?’

Ukka stared at him, confused, blue eyes burning with pain and fever.

‘Do it!’ yelled Maddaska.

Putin still hesitated. Maddaska brought up his own gun to do the job himself.

But he was too late.

Ukka’s jaw fell open – and then was ripped clean away from his skull by something inside him. A familiar spiked head stuck out at them. The Ilijah opened Ukka’s throat vertically as if it were unzipping the stiff, rough flesh, and blood spurted out to spray the walls.

Ukka’s lifeless body fell to its knees, and the Ilijah leaped free even as Maddaska recovered enough to open fire, blast after blast. But while Ukka’s corpse began to pool out like water over the stone floor under the impacts, Maddaska and his men could all hear the sound of the Ilijah as it ran away down the passage.

‘They can kill us too,’ Putin said shakily. Then he rounded on Maddaska. They can kill *us*!’

Maddaska brought up his gun to Putin’s head. ‘Enough of that, just get after that thing.’

‘Pursue that?’ Putin shook his head. ‘You’re mad. We have to get out of here.’

‘I shan’t order you again,’ Maddaska hissed, tapping the gun barrel lightly against Putin’s leathery cheek. ‘Go. I must get to Bantagel. He

must ensure we have protection against those things.'

Putin glared at him, then slowly turned and led the other men on.

Maddaska listened to their footsteps fade. Then he headed back to the hidden doorway the Boor had taken.

When he reached there, he could hear the sound of frantic Ilijah, scrabbling and banging at the doors, still trying to get inside.

'There must be a hidden tunnel round here,' Benny said, peering at the walls, tracing her fingers lightly over more pictograms. 'Janrees probably found a back way or something on her way out of the place.'

'So what does she want with Forno?' Arko said. 'If she harms him...'

The Waska trailed off as a scrabbling noise started up. It was coming closer.

'Ilijah,' Han said fearfully.

'They're in, then,' Starl muttered.

'Come on,' Benny said, snatching the torch and jogging off into the gloom. 'Time to face up to our demons.'

'Think like Joseph,' Starl said, close behind her. 'There's nothing ahead of us, there's nothing ahead of us...'

But there was, of course. Once again the dark air stirred as if motes of luminous dust were being disturbed by their presence. The towering mass began to reform out of the golden trails of light, illuminating the chamber, red eyes burning, deep voice booming.

Benny unhitched her rucksack and threw it at the apparition.

There was a flurry of sparks and the projection grew fainter.

The rucksack landed smouldering on the other side, thick smoke rising from it. Then she chuckled the torch too, and the black metal flashed electric blue before its light went out and it too fell smoking to the floor.

'What do we chuck at it now?' Arko shouted wildly as a familiar hissing shriek started up along the passage. That lizard thing's almost on top of us!'

'We'll just have to hope this thing's not strong enough to kill,' Benny said, waving at the fading, flickering projection.

'Quickly, before it gets stronger.'

Arko ran for it. He howled as his fur singed and smoke curled lazily up from his body. But he spun round and smiled at her.

'It's nothing. Come on!'

Benny charged after him, shrieked herself as the shock lit up every nerve in her aching body, but it was over in a second.

She took a deep breath and almost choked on the terrible smell of burnt hair, coming from Arko's singed black body. She hugged him and kissed his shiny black nose. A few seconds later, Starl followed on, silently braving the charge, dragging Han behind him who squealed

like a baby as the energy crackled round her.

The projection of the demon was now fainter than a reflection in dirty glass. Then they saw the Ilijah hop round the corner and into evil view. In form it resembled the first one Benny had faced in the pit, though it was bigger, as big as Wolsey, and the barbs on its body looked tough enough already to pierce metal.

‘Back up,’ Benny instructed. ‘Slowly. I think it’s a young one.’

The Ilijah hissed again and leapt at them.

The projection sent static through the lizard’s body and it twisted and crackled before falling limply, twitching, to the stony ground.

‘We could’ve used you earlier,’ Arko muttered.

Just then, grey shadows shifted around the corner. A blast of Nishtubi gunfire crackled through the projection and melted the rock behind them.

‘Back!’ shouted Starl. ‘Quickly!’

As another blast smashed into stone, they were off again, racing into the dark. But there was a faint blue phosphorescence about this new corridor, enough to see at least a metre or so ahead.

And enough to see that another tunnel was branching off from the main one.

‘That thing will keep them busy for a few minutes,’ Arko said, skidding to a halt. ‘But we’re leaving Forno behind us.’

‘We have to find him,’ Benny agreed. ‘Hey, the Argians keep their oracle round here somewhere, remember?’ she said lightly. ‘It can pinpoint the whereabouts of anyone in the universe. A Waska on its own doorstep shouldn’t be a problem, right?’

‘Priorities,’ Starl reminded her.

‘*This* is my priority, Secret Squirrel,’ she hissed at him, dead serious again. ‘Saving the life of a friend.’

‘For how long if we don’t get word of this place outside? Look, when we were approaching Venedel space, I dropped a high-level comms sat with an auto-scrambler in the *New Dawn*’s other escape pod.’

‘So that’s where it went,’ grumbled Arko.

‘It’s the only way I had to launch it. It’ll patch through a communication on a set frequency directly through to Federation command, but its range isn’t fantastic. The *Dawn* had a power relay to boost any messages I sent through to there, but if we can take the Nishtubi ship and get close enough... Han knows enough names to let some serious heads roll, and my authority will ensure we’re listened to in the right quarters.’ He looked at Han. ‘There are many decent, fair-minded people in the Federation administration, whatever you might think.’

Han might not look convinced, but Benny decided she had to be.

'I understand.'

'But you won't come?'

'I can't leave Forno.'

'Nor me,' Arko added.

Starl nodded. 'Then we have to part company.'

'You're going back? With the Nishtubi there?' Arko asked incredulously.

'We'll duck down here,' Starl said, pointing to the new branch in the passage but leaving his eyes on Benny. 'Try to double back.'

Benny nodded, and took his hand. 'We'll keep on this way,' she said. 'Give them the slip, and go back the way we came.'

It sounded so easy, she thought. No problem.

As easy as saying goodbye.

Starl leant in and kissed her lightly on the mouth. His lips were claggy, his breath wasn't exactly minty fresh, but just for a few seconds it felt like heaven.

'See you, then,' Benny said. Starl ducked down the tunnel, hauling Han after him. The darkness soon swallowed them up.

Benny turned to Arko and sighed. He took her hand and squeezed it. 'Shall we?'

Together they turned and ran down the rocky passage.

When the tremor came, it knocked them to their knees.

'What's that?' squeaked Forno. 'It feels like an earthquake!'

He was only kept on his feet by the force of Janrees's arm locked round his neck as she marched him ahead of her.

'No matter,' Janrees hissed. 'I must awaken my people. We must strike against the Boor now, while he is still weak. And then we shall steal the Nishtubi ship and escape this world.'

Forno closed his eyes, terrified. From the kinds of things she was saying, and from the variety of people in the galaxy that it seemed were going to pay dearly for her five hundred year incarceration, it was evident that Janrees was not quite as pleasant as Starl seemed to have imagined. She had dragged him off through a hidden tunnel before he could even cry out in the dark – it was the way she had come when leaving the temple, she'd explained.

Every other question he'd tried had come out too strangulated to make any sense. Now, in the aftermath of the tremor, Forno took advantage of her relaxing her grip on his throat.

'How are you going to wake your people up?'

'I shall find a way.'

'So why do you need me?'

'You can sniff out my enemies, even in the dark.' Janrees cuffed his snout, almost fondly. 'You shall be my eyes and ears while I work, to

ensure I am not disturbed. Serve me well, and I may let you live on as my pet.'

Forno could only squeal in protest as Janrees dragged him further along the gloomy tunnel.

The Nishtubi craft was silent and still, empty. Their camp was deserted. There would be no battle here.

Renad had directed his men, who soon had the ship surrounded; all except Hoodath, who'd slunk away to shelter, not fighting their cause, instead recording this pivotal moment from behind a tree.

With guns, spears and shouts, the men had thrown everything they had into an assault on the Nishtubi ship. The vegetation was burnt away or was pulled to the forest floor.

The white, clean walls of the craft were scorched and dented.

But the doors were sealed tightly shut, and there seemed no way in. Their glorious, final stand had been utterly futile.

'Switch off your engines. We must preserve the fuel.' Renad shut his eyes, and the sudden silence in the clearing hammered his head with the same fury he felt inside. His gods had forsaken him. In vengeance for his lack of faith they had taken away everything he had valued. And their final act was to take away even the small glory his own sacrifice for his people might bring. For whether Renad lived or died, the heart of his settlement, of his culture, would beat no longer. All that was left were the lies scrawled in Hoodath's ridiculous skin-bound volume.

Renad glared at the scribe hatefully. He was clutching his book to his breast like he was cradling a dying lover. Now the danger was past, he was happy to approach the Nishtubi ship.

Hoodath stared at the piles of fallen vegetation. 'Why did they disguise their craft from eyes in the sky?' he mused.

Renad thought it a stupid question. 'To hide from the gods themselves who would be angry to see their temple so defiled.'

'The aliens do not believe in Argian gods,' Hoodath said haughtily. 'I don't think they want the ships in the sky to see their vessel here. I believe they acted here without the Federation's full consent.'

'All aliens are the same,' Renad said.

'They are *not*,' Hoodath replied, and held up his precious book. 'I have been reading our recent histories and –' he struggled to remember the word – '*cross-referencing* them with...' He faltered.

Renad narrowed his eyes. Hoodath was sweating like a pig.

'I cross-referenced them, compared them, with data from the printing machines in the cells, Renad. They can help –'

'The Thane declared those machines out of bounds, Hoodath,' Renad said furiously.

‘But the machines are good, they contain knowledge!’ the scribe protested. ‘The Nishtubi lied to us, poisoned us against the Federation, made things worse...’

‘Of course they lied to us,’ Renad thundered. ‘They are aliens!’

‘That argument doesn’t even make sense,’ Hoodath cried, trembling with fury.

‘It is *you* who has been poisoned,’ Renad said menacingly.

‘Poisoned against your people, by alien knowledge.’

Hoodath was affronted. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘In the Dark Days, the Gods destroyed knowledge for a reason,’ Renad said. ‘To keep men such as you in their place.’

There were angry murmurs of assent from the other men, cheated of their vengeance for now, their anger and frustration transferring to a new target.

‘I *know* my place!’ Hoodath said, hopping from one foot to another like a nervous child.

‘A place on high?’ Renad sneered. ‘A lofty perch beside the old Thane? Well the old Thane is dead, Hoodath, dead because he dealt with aliens and their knowledge.’

‘You’re missing the point, Renad!’ Hoodath thundered. ‘My histories show –’

‘Your histories,’ Renad parroted, and yanked the heavy book from Hoodath’s sweaty grasp. ‘Your *precious* histories...’

Renad opened up the book and gripped each side tightly.

The muttering of the men stopped dead.

Hoodath stood stock still, as if a statue would incur less wrath. But to Renad, that simply betrayed the arrogant little fool’s real intent through his endless writings. They themselves were a kind of monument, a vision that Hoodath had crafted, and that would last. A treatise on the real dark days on Venedel, preserving for all time the actions that had led the gods to forsake Renad and his people.

Long ago, the gods had wished all knowledge destroyed.

With a roar of hatred, Renad tore the book apart. Hoodath screamed, a long and terrible sound, as if it were he being ripped limb from limb, not just some mouldering, black-scratched pages that no one would even live to read. Renad kept tearing at the paper and skin, tearing apart the past, shouting and panting. His mind felt overgrown and choked, like untended land. Hoodath grabbed desperately for the fragments as they floated away on the breeze.

Then the earth beneath them heaved and shook as an enormous tremor passed through the clearing. When it subsided, Renad was still shaking. The tattered binding of the book fell uselessly from his hands, and Hoodath threw himself desperately on top of it.

Renad got stiffly to his feet and faced his men, who were staring

round the clearing fearfully as if looking for the cause of the disturbance. 'It is the gods!' he shouted. 'The gods have sent a sign. They have looked down on us and we have pleased them!'

Hoodath rolled over, flat on his back, and looked at Renad with absolute hatred, his face streaked with tears and mucus.

Scraps of paper eddied around him like butterflies. 'It's some kind of natural disturbance, you idiot!' he bawled. 'That's all it is! All it is!'

'The temple,' Renad said, ignoring him, striding away. 'We must go to the temple.'

'You're certain you can adapt the cure to include the Nishtubi?'

Maddaska looked hard into Bantagel's little eyes, but instead of sincerity all he could discern was amusement. He fought to remain calm.

'You make the big mistake,' Bantagel said, turning back to his experiment. 'You want me get you out of it, huh.'

'You might not be immune yourself,' Maddaska pointed out.

'Did you consider that?'

'Straight away,' Bantagel said with a crafty smile. 'So I check. I fine. I thank for your concern.'

Maddaska did not reply. Bantagel was milking this for all it was worth. Here in the Boor lab, Maddaska felt ill at ease, out of his depth. The place was small and oppressively hot, lit harshly in ultra-violet. Banks of old-fashioned computers cluttered the room, and on the workbench that ran its length, chunks of Ilijah floated in sick-looking solutions in twenty or more jars. The equipment was primitive, ancient. The biosurgeons that Maddaska had employed had used state-of-the-art technology to re-engineer the Ilijah. Suppose Bantagel's meagre resources couldn't compete?

'High Boor Bantagel, *please* –'

'I tell you already. In time, sure,' Bantagel said airily. 'But we don't got time. On the news, they reckoning the first bombardment fall in less than a couple of hours. And thirty minutes after then...'

Maddaska wanted to scream at him. 'You've got a ship here, underground,' he pointed out. 'We must evacuate, get everyone out of here.'

Bantagel scoffed. 'How we do that in the time? I got two hundred of my people here, I got fifty more of twenty races, I got –'

'But we have to get off-world before the bombs fall,'

Maddaska implored him. 'We can return here once the heat is off –'

'How we get past the blockade, schmuck?' Bantagel said.

'You want I should lead my people to a death trap in the skies?'

'We can run the blockade, I've done it before.'

Bantagel lost his patience, started shouting at him. 'You seen the

size of my ship? It carry over a thousand, not some itty bitty crew of twelve like yours do, and even then you crash, you burn! You schmuck!

Each word seemed to bruise Maddaska's tough grey hide. He shut his eyes, tried to breathe deeply. 'So what do we do?'

'That better,' Bantagel said, lowering his own voice. 'You come to me for all the answers. You mess up big, but we gotta make the best of things. I tell you what we do. I already got some of my boys waking up. They going to warm up the ship, check it all A-OK. We wakes up just the leaders, them in the private freeze-cubicles, makes them agree to my terms just as we plan. Then, when the opening bombs fall, we take off under that cover. We take big chunk of Venedel with us, and the Feds, they think the destruction on the planet more than they bargain for. They so busy looking at why that be we have the edge. We sneak out.'

Maddaska frowned, not altogether convinced. 'And if the rest of the base isn't destroyed, we can come back when the heat is off and continue the plan?'

'Yeah. And this way, we have enough numbers to fight our way back for them if comes to it.' Bantagel slapped the side of his nose with a fat slimy finger with a low rattling chuckle.

Maddaska considered. 'At least this way the Ilijah will all be dead, and there'll be time to ensure our own immunisation.'

'Yeah, you might get out of this one by your skinny teeth,'

Bantagel went on, still with that unsettling smile. just then the entire room began to shake violently, as if a giant buried beneath them had woken and stirred, the personification of Maddaska's frustration. Sparks flew from a bank of computers, and a jar of thick fluid shattered.

'What's happening?' Maddaska shouted. 'Bombardment, already?'

'Tremor,' Bantagel answered, jumping back as a crack opened up in the ceiling and a rain of dust and pebbles fell down on them. 'Been getting them couple of days.'

'There's been no evidence of seismic disturbance,' Maddaska said, still concerned even though he could feel the rumbling starting to subside now. 'The tremors must be localised to here. A malfunction of some kind in the base?'

Bantagel nodded to his lab bench, now coated in dust, and shook his head. 'We better hope not. We no want the temple crashing in above our heads before we getting out of here.'

Maddaska looked up at the ominous crack in the ceiling. The facade of the temple was built above them. But the heart of the original Argian temple was beneath them.

Where the giant was sleeping.

16 Wake Up and Smell the Coffee

The gloomy stone passage had led Benny and Arko further and further down into the bowels of the temple. The layout of this place was bewildering, and Benny didn't like to think just how vast the whole area must be.

Eventually they found themselves in a metal corridor, lit a more certain blue. A long way later, the passage terminated in a wide, hexagonal partition of frosted glass.

'Looks like we've found our first sleepers,' Benny said. 'Here in this chamber.' There was a bank of controls built into the wall to the right of the partition, but it all looked hideously complicated. In stark contrast, there was a small control panel set into the wall to the partition's left. A large green button was simply dying to be pressed, so she held her breath and did so.

A viewscreen cut horizontally across the glass partition, divided into six square monitors. There were just six more buttons on the little control panel in a corresponding arrangement, so Benny pressed each of them. Each monitor flickered hesitantly into life, and she took an involuntary gasp.

Lit by a cold, cold blue light, dozens of people stood frozen in a cavernous chamber – Benny realised that they must've been skirting round its perimeter. She realised that when thinking about these crooked Rip Van Winkles she'd imagined quiet, cosy cubicles, each with a sound sleeper curled up inside. Maybe that was true of the leaders of each group, but clearly not for the rank and file. The poses of these shadowy figures spoke of anger and violence, and fear. Some kind of stasis field must be in place, used to hold them in position before the cold kicked in – bargain basement cryogenic suspension. Naked except for their flimsy coverings, some of the people had been running when the stasis had stopped them, while others had fallen to their knees. Arms were thrown up in the air, some perhaps in defiant gestures, others more in panic. Out of the icy skin of each of them, IV tubes trailed upwards into the shadows where tiny medical droid units lazily hovered, oblivious to the freezing temperature, tirelessly monitoring their charges.

'There must be dozens of rooms like these here, just waiting for the wake-up call,' Arko said, ears pricked up in alarm.

'If the Boor gets his way, that might not be too long.' Benny bit her thumb. 'Imagine it... this bunch of crooks inflicting themselves on the cosmos again.'

Arko nodded. 'All banded together, with those Ilijah things ready to drop into any civilised world... Maybe the Federation's got the right

idea, nuking this place.'

'Interesting view of "the right idea", Arko, blowing up an entire world just to cover your naughties...' Benny paused.

'Funny, isn't it. The past always catches up with you in the end.' She thought of Jason, and all the secret hopes that had brought her here. 'Unless you really want it to, of course.'

Arko was still looking out over the frozen figures. 'What the hell are we going to do?'

'Look for Janrees's people. At least that might lead us to Forno.'

'And then?'

'Get the hell out and hope that Starl will come back for us once he's saved the day.' She smiled at Arko. 'Nice to know it's not my responsibility for a change.'

They walked on down the corridor and before long came to another of the frosted glass panels. Benny did her thing with the control panel.

'Keep your claws crossed there's an army of nubile nymphettes the other side of that glass,' Benny said.

Arko screwed up his nose – then dropped his jaw.

'Oh goddess,' Benny whispered.

The chamber, eerily lit in the familiar sharp blue, held a solid black cluster of Shik, scores and scores of them, so many it made Benny's flesh crawl. They looked like marionettes with so many wires curling up from their bodies to the ceiling of droids.

But hanging above them, just out of reach in midair, frozen in mid-fall, was something surreal, impossible. A dangling, blood-spattered angel with a spiky head of long blonde icicles, mouth open wide in a silent scream.

'Shell,' Arko croaked.

'Shh,' Starl hissed, peering down the tunnel into the gloom.

'Someone's coming.'

He and Han hurried back to the last fork in the rock wall and ducked inside, pressing themselves against the rough stone. A clumping of footsteps got louder and louder, and soon the familiar gargoyle shapes of the Nishtubi guards went past. Starl held his breath, but no glittering sapphire eyes looked their way.

'That clinches it,' he said. 'We must be on a path out again.'

'Unless the Nishtubi are as lost as we are,' Han said sourly.

They re-emerged into the passage, which was leading upward at a slight gradient. After a few minutes they came to what looked like a dead end, until Starl found a tiny metal stud in the wall. The rock slid smoothly back, to reveal another passage.

'Look,' Starl said, pointing at the ground. 'Footsteps, and ours among them I think.' He crouched down, and saw how churned up the

dusty ground was. 'This is probably the tunnel Janrees took Forno along. The Nishtubi must've taken it too. To avoid the projection, perhaps... or maybe just to try and head us off.'

'So we're not lost after all,' Han muttered. 'Great. But even if we do get out, there are about twenty thousand Ilijah waiting to get in!'

Starl said nothing, leading the way down the dark passage.

It seemed to take a lifetime but eventually they arrived back at the main doors. A cold, dry rasping sound and the scrabble of claws on stone told them both that Han had been right.

'So what now?' Han pouted. 'Go outside and we're dead. Stay in here and we're dead.'

'Cheerful thought.' Starl pressed his ear against the heavy doors and frowned. 'But help might be at hand.'

Renad surveyed the still burning wreck of the alien spacecraft, belching out its clouds of poisonous smoke, and nodded with satisfaction. It had to be the work of the gods. He had no idea where this vessel had come from. Hoodath would perhaps know, but he'd been left sobbing like a child outside the Nishtubi ship.

It wasn't important. This craft had been destroyed here on the ground, outside the temple. Another omen.

Moving beyond the ship so he could see past the smoke to the temple, Renad saw the clutch of Ilijah blocking the doors, and retreated hastily back to his men.

'We advance on foot,' he instructed. 'As far as possible, all those with flame-throwers form a defensive circle round those without. We must breach the temple doors and hunt down the enemies inside.'

Weary faces, glistening with perspiration, nodded in silence, then assembled themselves into formation.

'No more delays,' Renad shouted. 'We attack!'

They charged forwards, men with flame-throwers moving round in tight circles, blasting freely as the lizards scuttled about them looking for a way past the fire to get to the flesh.

The creatures cried out like screaming babies as their skin blackened and cracked, but there were too many of them, they were too quick, and too bulky to be killed quickly. Renad realised as he dashed across the temple courtyard, his weapon blazing, that unless they could get the doors open quickly their attack would end right here.

When he reached the great stone doors he placed his back squarely against them. 'Quickly someone!' he yelled to his terrified men, still dancing grotesquely with their Ilijah partners. 'Open these doors!'

To his astonishment, the doors pushed open, propelling him forward. He staggered as a huge, horrifyingly fast Ilijah ran at him,

ducked under his fire, knocked his legs from under him.

It stared at him, teeth bared, ready to pounce.

Then it was kicked aside, into the incinerating blast of another man's flame-thrower. The alien man Renad had seen thrown into the pit was standing over him, smiling.

'One good turn deserves another,' the alien said, and dragged Renad to his feet. Before Renad could say a word, the man was running away after the Federation woman, Han, into the black haze beyond the burning ship.

Renad understood none of this, but had sense enough to dash for the dark cover of the temple entrance now standing open. 'Quickly,' he yelled. 'Everyone inside!'

Burning up the lizards as they threw themselves at the men and women hurrying inside, Renad felt his fear and anger falling away. He wished only that he was a wiser man, that he might make sense of these portents the gods were sending so swiftly now to guide him.

'So that blue light and the crack I heard,' Benny said, eyes bright with excitement. 'Shell fell through directly into there. She's alive!'

The surreal vision seemed to be staring at them, imploring them to get her out. Pretty much, Benny thought guiltily, the way she'd been looking since they'd first met on Pan Leica.

Arko was frantic. 'But how *can* we get her out of there? If we revive her we'll revive the Shik, they'll kill her.'

Benny placed a hand on his furry arm. 'But Arko, she's still infected. The Ilijah inside her will be in suspended animation too, remember? Until we find a cure...'

Arko banged his fist against the glass. Benny could imagine his frustration and fear, at finding her alive but still so close to death, from not one but two sources. Shell could so easily be taken away from him again.

'Hey. The Boor must have the cure to these things, to hand over to his victims in exchange for cash or whatever,' Benny said. 'We've got to find Bantagel.'

'Oh, aye. And Forno and Janrees while we're about it. Before the bombs start dropping.' Arko turned away from her. 'No problem.'

'Or you could just sit on your fat furry arse if you prefer,'

Benny said sharply. 'But the sooner we get going, the more chance we have, right?'

She started off down the corridor, and immediately cried out as she skidded and nearly fell on her backside herself.

A shallow wash of water was covering the floor of the corridor. Arko's nose was twitching.

'That smells bad,' he said.

Benny splashed along a few feet further. 'But where's it coming from?'

'Is the ice melting?' Arko hazarded. 'Are they going to wake up? Is Shell going to –'

'I don't think so,' Benny said. 'This smells like...' She trailed off as, in a crashing moment of clarity, the implications became clear. 'Oh no.'

'What?'

'Quickly,' said Benny, speeding off.

The water got deeper and darker, splashing around Benny's pockets. Breathing through her mouth to try and avoid the worst of the smell, Benny saw a doorway ahead and pressed the obliging green button on the control panel outside. A spark cracked through her finger and she yelped.

Arko took her hand and looked. 'You all right?'

'Yeah, it's nothing,' Benny said, shaking her fingers.

The door slid slowly upwards out of the soup, and they gaped at the sight inside.

'Oh, that's just fantastic,' Benny muttered.

The spacious room was flooded with the filthy water. From the dark, dead bank of monitors and controls along one wall it had probably been some kind of monitoring station for the adjoining stasis chambers, but now it was fit only to be a paddling pool for swamp things. A steady trickle of liquid splattered down from the smashed and sagging ceiling, and protruding through the enormous split was a sheet of scorched white metal. Part of the undercarriage of a massive space ship.

Arko gave a low whistle. 'Is that what I think it...'

'It's the *New Dawn*,' Benny said distantly. 'We crashed down into the swamp, and Starl hit the antigravs to lift us out. Then the power went, and it sank back down again. But the stress on the swamp bed must've been too great...'

'Starl said,' Arko breathed. 'He noticed the swamp level had gone down. The swamp must've totally drained away.'

'Into the systems?' Benny wondered, wincing. 'Mind you, the impact alone would've –'

'Those tremors,' Arko realised. 'All the troubles you had in the air ducts...'

'And quite possibly the early resuscitations,' Benny concluded. 'This place is royally screwed.'

'And Shell's trapped inside it.'

'We're all trapped inside it!' Benny put her head in her hands and kicked her foot through the water in frustration. 'And now, for my next trick, I shall bring the entire roof crashing down on us.'

A few moments later she felt Arko tugging on her arm. 'Do you want to try that trick again,' he whispered. 'Only I don't think you got it quite right.'

'What...?' Benny opened her eyes.

Then wished she hadn't.

There was a scrabbling noise from somewhere up in the jagged black split in the ceiling. Staring down at them with bright yellow eyes, claws hooked into the belly of the ship, was an Ilijah. A second later, and another had joined it, cocking its head, staring. One more fell down with a splash into the swamp water. Then another.

Benny stared at them in weary hatred. 'They never give up, do they.'

'If the swamp has drained right out, it'll just be a mud plain,'

Arko said grimly. 'Easy access. Maybe they can smell frozen meat as easily as fresh meat.'

'All they've been reared for is killing and breeding,' Benny muttered, sloshing slowly backwards out of the door. 'Once they get a scent, I don't suppose they give up on it in a hurry. Now back off, Arko, slowly.'

They reached the doorway. Movements in the murky water sent the hairs spiking up straight on the back of her neck. She slapped her palm down on the green button.

But the door didn't move.

She pressed it again, and again, more frantically each time.

'The water's shorted it out,' Arko said. 'Circuit's dead.'

It was a feed line Benny decided she wouldn't take. Instead, as the splashing in the water came nearer, she ran, dragging the Waska after her.

'This is useless,' Putin said, angrily coming to a halt. They'd trekked for what felt like miles, down into what must be the ancient heart of the original temple, and even by torchlight there was clearly nothing to suggest anyone had passed this way. 'We've lost the intruders.'

Antrin looked slightly nervous. 'Maddaska won't be pleased.'

'Maddaska could've killed these people when he had the chance,' Putin retorted. 'This planet could be a cinder in just a few hours. What do we care about a handful of chancers? They'll be taken care of when the bombs drop. Totalled. Roasted.'

'Where will we be then?' Garvok wondered.

'Safely off this dump,' Putin answered reassuringly, although how exactly this would come to pass he wasn't yet sure. They may all be trained soldiers, but Ukka's death had left the Nishtubi feeling horribly vulnerable. They needed somewhere safe to hide out. If Maddaska had a problem with that, he could –

Putin was interrupted in his pondering by a sudden wispy glow up ahead, as if someone were shining a dim torch beam at smoke.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘It’s just another of those stupid projections.’

‘Looks different, this one,’ Antrin mused. ‘Better.’

Putin had to agree. The definition and design of the ‘demon’ was much more convincing, and he imagined that the overall effect, to a primitive tribesman, would be truly terrifying. He reluctantly had to hand it to Bantagel. With its vast skull head, huge gaping eye sockets and bony fangs, its hook-like fingers and wraith’s body, the apparition was remarkably well done.

Putin turned to Antrin and smiled. ‘We need something to throw through it to disperse the static charge. Want to volunteer yourself, Antrin?’

The men chuckled good-humouredly, welcoming any light relief after Ukka’s hideous death.

Then the projection sent out two balls of white lightning from its staring sockets and Antrin burst into flame. He screamed, flapping his blazing arms about. The other Nishtubi leapt away from him in panic. Putin knocked Antrin to the floor with one heavy fist, hoping to roll him over in an attempt to put out the fire, but cried out in pain as his knuckles burnt to jelly.

It was hopeless. Antrin had stopped screaming and struggling. His body seemed white hot. Seconds later it was a pile of blue ash.

The wraith floated towards them. Putin fired bolt after bolt from his rifle straight through it, ordering his men to do the same, but their fire had no effect. This was no projection, no imitation demon from the temple’s ancient past.

This had to be the real thing.

Screaming, Putin led the charging Nishtubi away back down the gloomy corridor.

The smell came so thickly Forno almost gagged. He ran back to Janrees, who was still staring at the complicated instrument panel in frustration. Clearly she hadn’t yet fathomed which button meant ‘defrost’, despite close study of the controls in her now empty private cubicle.

‘Boor coming,’ Forno twittered.

Janrees looked sharply at him. ‘This way?’

Forno shrugged worriedly. ‘Nearby, anyway.’

‘I must see for myself. Remain here.’

She ran off lightly down the corridor, Starl’s coat flapping around her as if she had leathery wings. Forno thought about running off, but from the speed she’d set off down the corridor, he concluded she’d catch him again in minutes.

As it turned out, he was alone for some time. He peered through at all the humanoid females in the dark blue room, frozen in icy defiance. If their leader was anything to go by, Forno imagined there wouldn't be that much change in their disposition once they were warmed up. He glanced idly at the controls. He imagined the procedure would be a fairly logical one, but there were so many possibilities, and how much time did they have? Perhaps if he could help her, in exchange for his freedom and a promise not to harm his friends... He studied the controls more closely and shook his head – then noticed a tangled web of fibre optics that scaled the wall from floor to instrument bank.

'I wonder,' Forno muttered, scurrying beneath the panel to see more closely.

A few minutes later, Janrees came back, a fierce flush on her cheeks.

'Are they coming here?' Forno asked her, still on his knees.

'There are many Boor,' she said. 'Twenty, maybe more. They are moving with purpose, of that I am sure, but they are not coming for us.' She eyed him grimly. 'Not yet. But we cannot have much time.'

That made up Forno's mind. With a small army of those hideous creatures roaming the place, a measure of protection suddenly seemed highly attractive.

'I think I can help you here,' Forno said nervously. 'To free your people from their sleep.'

'You can help me?' Janrees echoed. 'An animal?'

Forno sighed. It wasn't much excuse but he reminded himself she was five hundred years behind the times with race relations. 'I'm quite good with electric things. Look...'

He gestured at the controls and took her through his theory.

'Your own sleep was interrupted accidentally, probably by some kind of power surge going into the controls rather than from anyone operating them.'

'I woke alone,' Janrees confirmed.

'Now,' Forno said, ducking back under the panel. 'You'll see here that this cable has shorted through. It's linked to this set of controls...' He reached up and waved a hand over what he hoped was the right area. 'Which must feed through to your private cryogenic area.'

'You think I woke up when the cables shorted?'

'It would make sense, particularly if the Shik we saw were leaders of their group, too.' Forno waggled another group of wires. 'These seem to feed into *this* bank of controls.'

Janrees smiled. 'You think those wires feed into the circuits holding the rest of my people.'

'I *think* so, but I'm not sure how we can generate a charge to blow

the systems.’ Forno spat out the dangers as fast as his timid brain could conjure them. ‘Engineering that kind of power surge would be very dangerous. And it could be very dangerous to your people, too, you might’ve just been lucky when you woke up. And if the systems are unstable anyway, as that tremor seems to prove, and as the systems are probably linked, we might end up thawing out all the Shik too if we’re not careful...’

Janrees moved him bodily aside. ‘There is no time to debate the issue. We must move, and quickly.’ She studied the wires and cables, an expression of deep concentration on her face.

Then she grabbed a thick wad of them, and yanked down.

Forno yelped as sparks flew from the control panel, and the lighting about them flickered and died. A serene pale white light bathed the corridor, some kind of emergency lighting.

Janrees moved up close to the window, staring through into the blue. ‘It’s working,’ she whispered. Then again, more confidently. ‘It’s working!’

Even from where Forno was standing he could see that the IV cables stretching up into the medical droids were retracting.

He felt a flicker of pride tempered with fear. His theory, it seemed, had been sound.

But with his luck, it would probably be the sound of screaming.

Benny and Arko slewed to a halt as the lights in the slimy corridor flickered and went off.

‘Oh, wonder– Benny began, but then drab emergency lighting kicked in. ‘Wonder what’s going on,’ she finished lamely.

‘This place has had it,’ Arko said morosely. ‘And so have we.’

‘Wait a minute, listen,’ Benny whispered.

Arko did. ‘What? I can’t hear anything.’

‘Exactly. Nothing. No power. Which means...’

Benny jogged on along the corridor, her heart, already pounding frantically in her chest, going the extra distance so she could feel its thudding in her throat. Soon she was at the hexagonal window looking into Shell’s chamber.

Except Shell was no longer in midair, and the Shik marionettes had all had their strings cut. The droids were floating about pointlessly, IV tubes hanging down like severed umbilical cords.

‘Oh no,’ Arko said, now he’d caught Benny up. ‘Shell.’

‘The stasis field’s dropped. Everyone will be waking up. She’s trapped in there,’ Benny whispered. ‘With those things.’

Maddaska jumped and Bantagel snarled in annoyance as the lighting cut out in the laboratory. An alarm went off briefly, but the Boor crossed over to one of his computers and shut something off, before

hurrying back to his smoking experiment.

‘It’s not ruined?’ Maddaska asked, concerned.

Bantagel scrutinised his work. ‘No, I think we got our cure. Though it need the testing.’

Maddaska clapped his hands together. ‘Excellent.’

Bantagel gave him a filthy look that went pretty well with the rest of him. ‘This cure based on old cure. It work chiefly on the human types.’

‘Not the Nishtubi?’ Maddaska said quietly, fingers curling into fists.

Bantagel shrugged. ‘Nishtubi got the whole different physiognomy. It take me more time to find immunising for you.’

‘It should’ve been your first priority,’ Maddaska snapped bitterly.

‘On so many of the Federated worlds you have the humans,’

Bantagel retorted. ‘They be the ones we fleece; therefore they be the number one priority. You planning to be on their worlds when this babies get loose? Uh-uh, not unless we say so.’

‘I’ve had enough of this,’ Maddaska said, his clipped military demeanour flaking away a little more with every passing moment. ‘I brought you back!’

‘That right!’ Bantagel bawled at him, in a voice so savage Maddaska actually found himself backing off a step. ‘I am back! And everyone want to watch out for that fact, you know?’

A tense silence followed, with Maddaska uncertain how best to proceed with this confrontation, which was only broken by an insistent beeping from a monitor housed in one of the computer banks. Bantagel waddled over and flicked it on.

‘Report.’

Maddaska was too far away to hear what was being said by whoever was calling, but certainly close enough to be half-deafened by Bantagel’s outraged replies.

‘You say *what*? It cannot be. You wrong.’ He thumped a huge sticky fist down on the computer bank. ‘You got to be wrong. I coming to see for myself.’

The monitor blinked off and Bantagel came back over, his earlier animosity apparently forgotten for now. ‘Crazy talk.’

‘What is it?’

‘My men. They say our ship not flying nowhere.’

Maddaska wobbled more than he would’ve liked to display to Bantagel. ‘What?’

‘They say is another spaceship smashed down on right wing. Massive damage. She crippled, no fly.’

‘The ship of the humans, it has to be...’ Maddaska swore. He was about to ask what they could do now like a good Nishtubi should, when a number of red lights switched on alarmingly across the entire

array of computer banks.

‘No!’ Bantagel roared. ‘What this be, the joke?’

‘Well?’ Maddaska asked helplessly.

‘Systems failure,’ Bantagel spat as he tweaked heavy dials and pulled on levers and switches. The sleepers no sleep. They waking up. Or they dead from the power surge. I dunno.’

‘All of them are affected?’

‘Sections one and four.’ Bantagel peered at the display screens before him. ‘Five hundred people. This no right!’

Bantagel yelled, denting the computer bank with a fierce kick.

‘This my empire, my birthright! Now it just melting away!’

Maddaska’s voice had grown hoarse. ‘We’ve got to get out of here.’

‘I say what we do!’

‘If there’s no way out from here we must take my ship and –’

Bantagel eyed him balefully. ‘Outside? You sure? With the Ilijah waiting to get you?’

Maddaska’s shoulders slumped in defeat. It was as if the heavy silence in the room were pressing down on him, crushing him into the ground.

‘Come on,’ Bantagel said, a little more calmly, removing the phial of synthesised cure from its clamp. ‘We see what the deal be with these sleepers and the ship. See if we can’t find the way to make the mess clean, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Maddaska said miserably, and allowed himself to be led from the room.

Starl couldn’t remember the last time he’d run as fast as this.

He still had a firm hold on Han, but now he was using her to lean on as much as to drag her along with him through the forest.

Luckily, the Ilijah had seemed more interested in the temple than in pursuing either of them; perhaps they didn’t like the fire pumping from Han’s ship, or perhaps they were simply full up for now. Whatever, Starl decided it was about time fortune smiled on them.

Seconds after that thought had crossed his mind with a swiftness eluding his physical form, two bolts of fire had trailed down with a sulphurous whistling through the evening sky to land somewhere else in the forest. Two massive explosions ensued, one speedily following the other. Starl was thrown off his feet, and Han landed heavily beside him. He struggled for breath – now he was down here and sheltering from the rain of sticks, mud and ash that followed in the fireballs’ wake he decided he might as well make the most of it.

‘We’re out of time,’ Han moaned beside him, her eyes wide and panic stricken.

‘Not yet we’re not,’ Starl panted, cautiously looking up as the hail of

debris seemed to slacken off. 'Before the main bombardment –'

'We've got half an hour, maybe less,' Han snapped. 'Even if we manage to get on board the Nishtubi –'

'Save your breath for running,' Starl told her, hauling her to her feet. 'It's not far now.'

They found themselves on a small trail that Starl recognised from the tide marks around the base of the trees. He thanked those few lucky stars there must still be out there that the final warnings hadn't landed on top of them, or hadn't hit the part of the forest they still needed to travel through. It was hard enough trying to find a way through now, but with any and all landmarks burnt down or laying in pieces on the opposite side of the woods...

At last, they saw the Nishtubi ship.

'Someone's been here before us,' Han whispered.

'Down!' Starl hissed, catching movement in the bushes.

But it was too late. There was a small group of Venedel natives in the clearing, obviously guarding the ship for some reason, and one of them had been looking their way. He looked around desperately for some kind of weapon to defend themselves with, but there was nothing.

Then he saw it was the short, plump little man he'd seen before in the Thane's royal palace, the stuffy scribe. Although from the tears that streaked his face and the pieces his precious manuscript was in, perhaps news from the publishers hadn't been too favourable.

Starl rose cautiously to his feet. 'At least the man was unarmed, and educated. And from the way he was looking furtively behind him at the others, checking he was out of their sight, perhaps there was a chance to put their case.'

'Listen to me, er...'

'Hoodath,' the man said miserably. 'I had thought you were both dead.'

'Not for want of the likes of you trying,' Han muttered bitterly.

'The likes of me?' Hoodath echoed softly, looking behind him to check the other natives were still out of sight. 'There's no one like me here. They're all sheep. Philistines. But I don't believe all aliens are bad.'

Starl swapped glances with Han. 'Sure. You're a man who can listen to reason, right?'

'Don't patronise me,' Hoodath snapped, smoothing down his rumpled hair and clutching on to his collection of torn papers more tightly. 'Just listen. You've come to steal the Nishtubi ship, haven't you?'

Starl stared at him in surprise. 'Er, yes,'

'I'll help you,' Hoodath said fervently.

‘Why?’

‘Because of *this*.’ He held out the book. ‘And because my world will shortly be in the same sorry state. But you must help me in return.’

‘What do you want?’ Han asked, clearly curious despite herself.

Hoodath thrust out his ruined manuscript. ‘Posthumous celebrity,’ he said grandly. ‘Antiquity. For my work to be seen and my talent to be appreciated.’

Starl gingerly took the mass of scraps. ‘Uh... I can’t guarantee that we can –’

‘I know it’s in a dreadful mess,’ Hoodath said, his voice cracking as he got choked up once more. ‘I’ve been reordering it as best I can, but... I fear its reconstruction will be a work of the most scholarly endeavour. Your friend, the woman...’

‘Benny.’

‘She’s an archaeologist? And you, too...?’

Starl nodded hastily. ‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Then you’ll appreciate the importance of my work,’

Hoodath said, wiping his running nose on his arm. ‘Such an intimate record of life here, the documentation of a backward planet first drawn in then excised from the Earthlink Federation...’ His voice grew still more pitifully quiet. ‘It needs to be preserved. It needs to be seen. I’ll help you take the ship. Then you must swear to take it from here, with you, to the stars.’

Starl couldn’t believe what he was hearing. ‘Of course,’ he said, and hugged the book to his chest.

Hoodath smiled weakly and attempted a Federation salute.

Then he ran off shouting and whooping back towards the other guards, which were mainly women with children and the elderly. ‘Run! It’s the Ilijah! I saw one! Run!’

There was an immediate panicked exodus from the clearing, and Starl and Han moved round to the main doors to the Nishtubi ship.

‘Locked,’ Han said.

Starl handed her the tatty bundle of pages. ‘I can override the security protocols, but it might take a while.’

Han nodded wearily, and slumped down with Hoodath’s manuscript. ‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘I brought a good book.’

The dark, lithe, muscular bodies on the frosted floor of the chamber looked like sleeping panthers. Maybe sleeping wasn’t quite the right word. As far as Benny could tell, they were all dead.

A few metres away, Arko was searching this gloomy winter wonderland for Shell, his fur standing up with the cold.

Suddenly there was a grating rattling all about them, and two huge roaring explosions echoed distantly through the complex, one the echo

of the other.

‘It’s started,’ Benny said softly.

She trod on something, and there came a soft, feminine call of pain. Looking down, Benny grinned with relief and hastily jumped off Shell’s outstretched hand.

Arko almost pounced on the woman. ‘You’re all right?’

‘I think I’ve been better.’

Benny saw it was true in the wan lighting. Her memory of Shell’s appearance before she’d vanished had clearly been a more romantic one than the truth – she looked awful, her face ridged with sores and her neck thick with pustules.

‘Believe it or not, you were lucky,’ she said warmly. ‘The fall would’ve broken your neck if you hadn’t been stopped half way down by the stasis.’

‘And had a soft landing,’ Shell said, staring round nervously at the fallen Shik skittles. ‘Where are we?’

‘Don’t ask,’ Benny said, but a chittering, rasping noise came echoing from outside as if determined to offer an answer to her question regardless. She bit her lip as a swarm of small black silhouettes infiltrated the gloomy chamber.

17 The Biggest Sleep

‘I think that might be an exit over there, at the far side,’ Benny said, casting a nervous look behind her. Moments later, there was a ripple of movement as paralysed bodies began to shift and shake, and blood and egg-fluid arced through the air.

‘Nice to know these buggers are good for something,’ Arko said coldly, carrying Shell and walking as fast as he could, trying not to trip over the hissing Shik writhing beneath them like pythons in a snake pit.

‘If that is an exit, it must be to the next chamber,’ Arko said.

Benny nodded, and pushed her aching legs harder. ‘I’ll see if I can pick the lock.’ There was a rasping shriek from behind them as the Ilijah threw themselves into their feeding frenzy.

‘Before those things can pick our bones clean.’

She peered at the control panel by the now-familiar hexagonal door. There was some kind of grille covering it, perhaps to protect it from the cold. Her fingers fiddled numbly with it, sticking to it with frostburn. She gritted her teeth. ‘It’s too dark in here...’

Be careful what you wish for, she thought. A swirl of red light started to manifest itself above them, motes of dust picking out some hideous pattern. An image that was instinctively frightening, growing larger and more pronounced.

Benny gulped. ‘Oh Goddess, give me strength.’

Arko stared in horrified fascination. ‘It’s different from the last projection we saw.’

‘That’s because it isn’t a projection.’ Benny scrabbled with the grille more desperately. ‘Perhaps there’s something to the old Argian tomb raider stories after all. Something’s triggered off a defensive mechanism of some kind.’

Arko stared at her, wide-eyed. ‘In the Argian temple below?’

Benny could hear her voice rising higher with her pulse rate.

‘Whether it’s us, or the Boor, or even the pressure of the crashed ship, these things will destroy us if they can.’

‘And can they?’ Shell whispered, her voice so frail in the shadows.

The blood-red apparition shone stronger and brighter. Still the grille wouldn’t budge.

Renad motioned his men to fall back and keep silent, as the clattering footsteps grew louder and closer. Suddenly, a rabble of Nishtubi rounded the corner, panic-stricken, running as if their lives depended on it.

Hurling down his flame-thrower into the Nishtubi’s path, Renad

gave a shout of triumph as one of them tripped and fell over it, falling with the sound of a boulder against the ground.

The Nishtubi's fellows did not return for him.

At the same time, a distant thundering could be heard, the angry bellows of two vengeful gods. Renad smiled. Another sign.

'Kill the alien!' he shouted.

'You idiots, get off me!' the grey-skinned giant roared as blows and spears rained down on it. 'Behind us, there's...'

The Nishtubi trailed off, pointing over Renad's shoulder.

Renad turned sceptically, and saw the image of Maddos the fire demon, scorching the very air he floated in. Immediately, he fell down in worship before the visitation, his men falling with him. He was dimly aware of the Nishtubi scrambling up and running away, but his heart was too mixed with joy and terror to react.

'Vindication,' Renad whispered fiercely. 'Our hearts return to you, o gods! We are the vessels of your revenge against progress, against our sinful pride and arrogance...'

Renad's list was brought to an early conclusion when a flame hotter than any he had ever coaxed from the forest wood licked over his back. He felt his skin bubble and screamed out in pain. Falling forward, he turned in agony and confusion in time to see four of his warriors burn to piles of white ash in seconds under the god's fire.

'No, Maddos,' he shouted, 'we beseech you, spare us, we meant no trespass!'

But the spectre's only answer was to remove two more of Renad's people from its way. The others turned and fled.

'I do not understand your signs,' Renad shouted. 'Explain to me, lord, make me understand!'

The wraith turned and looked down on him. Its eyes were black as pitch, its grinning skull face full of malice. It raised two twisted hands that seemed to drip icicle fingers, as sharp as knives.

The gods had sent a messenger, proof of their existence and that Renad's faith was justified. But they did not wish him to serve them, and they would not allow him to understand. They only wished him dead. Why? What had he done, or not done?

But while the man in him would gladly die asking those questions, the animal in him was too strong, too ready to bolt.

Shaking his head, babbling nonsense in fear and disbelief, Renad scrambled under the apparition and pelted after his people.

A tiny part of him still seemed able to reason. If he could not now serve his gods, he could at least serve his people. To the end.

Forno tried to keep as much to the shadows as he could as woman after woman swayed dreamily through the hexagonal portal into the

corridor. There had to be about forty of them, of every shape and size human females came in. To Forno's sensitive nose, the air seemed sodden with chemical scents. It had a slightly deadening effect on the rest of his senses, made him a little groggy, a little light-headed.

These people had clearly been fed something pretty good through those IV tubes. Many of the women were singing, that same dreamy tune he remembered Janrees producing upon her exit from the temple. In stark contrast to her dreamy happy mood then, now she was shouting and snapping at her followers to pull themselves together, to listen to her, to fight the chemicals working against them in their bloodstreams. It didn't seem to be working very well. Most of them were just giggling at her, even when she struck them for doing so.

Then two giant percussive rumbles punctuated the singing.

The rhythm of the song was swiftly broken.

'That was the opening of the bombardment!' Forno called.

'You must ready yourselves for battle!' Janrees roared to her people, no longer cautious who might overhear her. 'Time is short, and our enemies – our ancient enemies – are here among us! The *Boor* are among us!'

'How right you is, sister!'

Forno turned, bewildered to hear the familiar, gruff gravelly voice. He'd let the drugs in the air numb his senses to the worst stench of all.

High Boor Bantagel was standing at the far end of the corridor. Behind him was the fearsome frame of General Maddaska, and behind him there seemed to be more Boor.

'Stay back, Bantagel,' Janrees called, her voice low and warning. 'As *you* can see, my people are behind me now.'

'Those dizzy dames?' Bantagel mocked, taking another step closer. 'As you can see, my men is now behind me.'

'As I can smell,' Janrees corrected him, screwing up her nose.

But Forno could sense her unease at the sight of the huge, thick-set, slimy creatures jostling behind the High Boor.

'Normally right now, I'd say, let's rumble,' Bantagel called.

'But we ain't got time for that. This place going to be history. I had us a way out, but it been taken away.' Forno felt his blood chill as Bantagel pointed at him. 'Taken by that thing and his no good ship.'

'They crashed down right on top of here,' Maddaska railed, and Forno at least was grateful for the clarification. 'Their antigravs wrecked the warp core, and the starboard wing is crushed flat!' Maddaska's voice was getting louder and higher; he sounded more and more unstable. 'Everything's ruined! Everything!'

Bantagel waved an arm at him to shut him up. 'So you see, Janrees, we got to be getting out of here to his ship, now.' He paused, suddenly

thoughtful, huge crusty brows squelching together. 'Hey, we might make the good team,' Bantagel said, advancing nearer, his men sluggishly plodding on behind him. Maddaska stared at him in disbelief. There's no room on our ship for her and her harpies.'

The harpies simply stood about smiling and giggling.

'Hey, not all the broads, just the Overseer there,' Bantagel said. 'That the deal.'

Janrees's lip curled in disdain. 'Never.'

Bantagel sighed and raised his gun. 'Then things going to be messy.'

There was a sudden shriek, low and horrible, from the far end of the corridor. Bantagel whirled around with surprising speed. Over his thick treacly shoulder Forno saw a Boor was crying out in pain, slamming himself from wall to wall as if he was mad.

A collective gasp went up – and a titter from the women – as a huge Ilijah rose up from behind the Boor's huge head. It brought its claws down on the hideous face, scratching out the eyes and guzzling the juices that ran from the sockets. Forno thought he might faint.

'Aw, jeez,' Bantagel sighed. 'Things is messy.'

Bizarrely, Maddaska turned to Bantagel as if in elation. 'Well, now... You may be immune, High Boor Bantagel, but we've bred them big enough to kill even you!'

The Nishtubi's great grey face was split open by a huge grin.

Bantagel split it a bit further by abruptly firing his gun into it.

Maddaska's brains and the back of his head blew out all over the corridor.

'You ain't immune to that, neither,' Bantagel noted with satisfaction as the body fell stiffly to the floor. 'Schmuck.'

Forno started shaking, in both revulsion and relief. The general's body was trampled as the Boor in the corridor raced away from their stricken comrade towards Janrees and her followers.

Behind their great hulking figures, more Ilijah came silently into view.

Suddenly Forno was in a confused, noisy stampede as women and Boor struggled to get clear in a confined space, jamming the corridor with their bulks. Shouts and screams pierced Forno's sensitive ears, Janrees was wailing for order, but her people were too drugged, too hysterical to heed her.

The Ilijah abandoned the tough, gristly body of the Boor and scuttled almost lazily closer to the panicking people in the crowded bottleneck.

There was a charge building in the air, and from the way her shadow was growing more and more pronounced in the ever-brightening crimson glow from the apparition, Benny knew she didn't have long.

At least she could see what she was doing now, and if she stayed calm, stayed focused...

‘Done it!’ she exclaimed, as the covering from the door controls finally clattered to the floor. ‘Now, quickly!’

She slapped her hand on the green button and to her relief the door panel opened. She let Arko and Shell stagger through.

The hairs on the back of her neck were up so hard it felt like someone was pulling them out, and she threw herself through the doorway...

Just as the air behind her seemed to catch light. A percussive blast threw her forwards. The demon was breathing fire, ready to obliterate anyone who would come looking for the treasures it guarded.

The oracle, she thought, dizzily, lying face down in a puddle of chemicals and molten ice. The Argian Oracle. It’s nearby, it has to be. It knows I’ve got questions and it doesn’t want me to have the answers.

‘Benny!’

Doesn’t want me to find Jason.

A feeling of drowsy warmth uncurled itself through her bones.

‘Come on, Benny!’

Wants me to lose everything down here in its underworld.

She would never have to move a single muscle again if she just lay down here and let go.

To lose myself...

She gasped as if waking from an endless sleep, as Arko hauled her off the soaking ground.

‘No time for lying around,’ he said fiercely. His face was lit red like a devil’s. She turned to see the demon was still hovering there, black eyes gloating, an evil prophecy made flesh, a warning to the curious who would always come.

‘Get *moving!*’

‘I’m sorry,’ Benny muttered, mind still reeling, and staggered forward over more fallen bodies, people this time. She crouched to feel a pulse in the nearest body, automatically.

There was nothing.

‘All these people are dead,’ Benny said. ‘Like the Shik.’

‘Must be from the power surge,’ Arko said, skidding in the slurry covering the floor, nearly losing his balance. Shell groaned as her head lolled on her neck.

‘Or from whatever ancient force still remains in the temple,’

Benny said. ‘Just for a moment then, I felt it. It wanted me to give myself away.’

‘Aye, right. To what, to you, would be the cold black waters of the Styx, I suppose?’ Arko said, listening more to the squeals and cries of

the ever-encroaching Ilijah than to her, and she couldn't blame him.

'I suppose so. I can't explain it, but... Wait, that's it!' She turned to him, fearful but excited despite herself, and dragged out the two coins and the stone from her pocket. 'I stole these things from the Thane's palace – relics from the temple! Perhaps there's some kind of resonance...'

'Or perhaps they've got you down for a tea-leaf,' Arko said.

Benny bit her lip. 'It's all part of the defense mechanism. We're close here, I know it. Close to the ancient powers.'

'I'll settle for getting closer to that door,' Arko said.

Benny shook her head to clear it, and helped Arko by taking some of Shell's weight, supporting her shoulders. She had to stay focused, to concentrate. Had to keep fighting. Staying alive was all that mattered.

The demon still hovered in the gateway to the other chamber like a dripping wound in the air, watching her go, alien, unfathomable. Hopping and splashing, the screeching Ilijah were allowed to pass it untouched.

Then it started to float after them.

Arko and Benny carried Shell, who mercifully seemed to have lost consciousness, up to the door. This time, Arko gripped the covering on the control panel and heaved with all his force, then threw it with all his strength at the approaching Ilijah.

Benny empathised so strongly with his futile act of defiance she felt she could cry.

She activated the glowing green button and the glass hexagon slid upwards. The emergency lighting was still in place outside as they heaved Shell across the threshold like the bundle of filthy rags she resembled. Then Arko slammed his paw against the button on their side of the divide and the door slid smoothly shut again.

Seconds later, the frenzied sound of the lizard-creatures throwing themselves at the glass shocked them into moving on immediately, despite their exhaustion.

They ran until they reached a three-way junction in the passage they both remembered. Benny tried to recall which way they had come before, but Arko refused to wait even for a moment and charged headlong down the one that veered off to the right. Benny followed him.

Arko had come to a halt in yet another junction, ears pricked up straight. Benny stared dumbly at him. Then she heard it too. It sounded like a herd of buffalo was stampeding down the corridor towards them, but the crowded sight they saw rounding the corner was no less surreal.

Janrees led the charge, with Bantagel right behind her. Hot on their

heels was an assortment of scantily-clad women who were being pursued in almost slapstick fashion by heavy-set Boor, reeking of death and perfume just like their leader. At the sight of Benny, Arko and Shell blocking their way, Janrees called a sudden halt.

‘More Ilijah?’ Benny asked in disbelief.

Janrees just nodded, before herding on her people after her.

‘Keep running!’ she ordered.

‘You too, boys,’ Bantagel called, and the Boor rumbled forward like dinosaurs at their leader’s command.

Then, Forno suddenly came sprinting round the corner, but he waved aside Benny’s and Arko’s excited greetings. ‘I’ve managed to close one of the bulkheads,’ he said, ‘But I think one or two of the Ilijah might get through. They can’t be stopped!’

Benny caught a flash of movement behind them.

‘There’s one,’ Benny screamed. ‘Look out!’

Bantagel spun round and caught the Ilijah mid-leap, his thick fingers closing round its neck. He squeezed it until it cracked, then flung it away.

‘Think you might be right there, Forno,’ Arko said grimly.

Forno just hugged Benny, then fussed over Shell and licked Arko’s face.

Janrees looked at Bantagel. ‘You saved my life,’ she said, expressing each syllable like she was spitting out poison.

‘You know it,’ Bantagel said, and winked at her. ‘Now you owe me. Owe me big.’

‘I’d rather have the Ilijah spit eggs down my throat than I would owe you anything.’

‘Hey, I got cure for that even if they do,’ Bantagel said, smiling. ‘So no worry there.’

‘What did he say?’ Arko said quietly, his eyes wide.

But Benny was already reaching into her rucksack. ‘Right, Bantagel,’ Benny said, pulling out Joseph and weighing him in her hand. ‘I think you’d better listen to me.’

‘What you do with that, bowl it at me?’ Bantagel mocked.

‘It’s a percussion grenade,’ Benny lied. ‘Harm us and I’ll set it off. You’ll be killing yourself. Drop the gun.’

Bantagel reluctantly did so.

‘We’ll all be killed by those lizards if we don’t follow the others,’ Janrees said, making to leave. But Benny raised Joseph as if to throw him at her, and Bantagel gripped Janrees’s wrist to hold on to her.

‘That cure you mentioned,’ Benny said, lightly tossing and catching Joseph in one hand. ‘Give it to my friend or I’ll blow us all to pieces.’

‘Kill or cure, huh?’ Bantagel smiled broadly at his own joke, fishing out a phial from his sweaty jerkin with his free hand.

‘Well, it not tested, but now could be good time, no?’

Forno took it gingerly from him, and Bantagel directed him to give Shell just a few drops of the liquid orally.

Benny and Arko looked deep into each other’s eyes as Forno administered Shell’s cure. It was a moment that seemed to give them both renewed strength. Arko lifted the sleeping Shell back up in his arms and cooed at her.

There came again the angry scratching, hissing noise of the Ilijah in the distance, a background noise that seemed to have replaced the old whining of the power systems.

‘Now can we move?’ Janrees said.

‘Where are we heading for?’ Benny asked.

‘The Nishtubi ship,’ Janrees stated.

‘Ah.’ Benny’s face fell. ‘Bad choice of plan. I’m afraid it’s been stolen. By Starl. He’s using it to try and stop the bombing.’

‘Yeah, of course. He no really just get the hell out of here soonest.’ Bantagel took an angry step towards her and Benny hastily lifted Joseph in warning.

‘I think you’ll find he’s got just a little more integrity than you,’ Benny said sweetly.

‘Where else can we go?’ Forno asked nervously.

‘Back down deep, I guess,’ Bantagel said. ‘Shelter from the bombs. It all we can do.’

‘After you,’ Benny said, but in actuality they all ran together.

18 Old Haunts

‘Taking her up,’ Starl muttered, hoping that that was indeed what he was doing. He’d spent valuable minutes breaking in and only seconds familiarising himself with the controls. Han was still strapping herself into the enormous chair designed for the Nishtubi co-pilot as he activated the thrusters.

‘Oh,’ Han said, guiltily. ‘I left his book outside.’

‘Ah,’ said Starl. Then he shot a grin at her. ‘Don’t worry. When the boosters ignite it’ll be charred to ash and scatter with the wind. He’ll never know his history is history.’

‘Before our present goes the same way,’ Han said, ‘How about getting this thing in the air?’

Hoodath watched with a lump in his throat as the ship took off, taking his precious writings to who-knew-where. It was strange, not to have the book’s reassuring weight in his arms.

He’d never imagined this might happen. He felt naked, and alone. There was nothing more to say and nowhere left to transcribe it. The situation was actually quite liberating. He felt his heart was up there in the sky, in the ship, too. There could be a new book to write now.

Then a scorched fragment of paper blew softly around his foot. He stared. There were many more pieces. He recognised them.

His heart fell back down to earth. But Hoodath was too numb, too shocked and grief-stricken, to hear it break on the ground.

Starl felt it was a fairly smooth take-off, all things considered.

And it felt good to be leaving the planet’s atmosphere rather more cleanly than they’d left it.

‘Will you try to run the blockade?’ Han asked him nervously.

Starl shook his head. ‘Too risky. In any case, we should be close enough to the comms sat to get unboosted transmissions through from here. We’ll just have to hope...’

‘Ain’t it the truth,’ Han said dryly. She pulled out a strip of plastic from inside her top and placed it on the console in front of him. ‘The frequency I contacted my runners on is encoded on to this.’

Starl placed a palm on it and turned to what he guessed was the communications systems. ‘Let me try to punch in my own secret frequency to this mad lump of metal and let my placers have it...’ He looked at her. ‘Thank you, Han.’

She shrugged. ‘You’re the only person who can help me now.’

He keyed in his broadcast signature, the unique coding that the comms sat would identify as his and his alone, into the systems, then

flicked a switch.

‘Governor, you must call off the attack on Venedel, repeat, call off the attack.’

Only static sounded distantly over the speakers.

‘Whatever it takes, the attack must be delayed,’ Starl went on. ‘They’re trying to destroy the evidence we need, evidence of the oldest, deadliest deceptions and atrocities of all... And I’ve got more.’ He looked over at Han who was staring, quite literally, into space and smiled grimly. ‘Much more. Prepare to receive the hidden frequency of the traitors in our Federation. Trace the comms signature, all broadcasts sent on that frequency. We have all we’ll need to finish this.’

He studied Han’s plastic strip and keyed in the frequency.

‘Do you think the message got through?’ Han whispered.

The vista of stars outside was so serene, so tranquil, it seemed impossible to think that death on such a scale was coming screaming out of the darkness.

‘It has to have got through,’ was all he could say.

‘And if it has...’ Han looked at him, her almond eyes dark.

‘Do you think they’ll listen?’

Static still drifted from the speakers.

Benny stood panting for breath while a pair of Boor managed to yank down the latest hexagonal bulkhead that stood between them and the Ilijah. She was certain that running up and down corridors was somehow far more demanding than running on any other terrain. This race was like a marathon, and with seemingly as many people running it.

They were all crowded together outside another chamber of dead sleepers, killed by the power surge. Bantagel didn’t seem too bothered about this lot not making it, who were, it seemed, a fairly undistinguished bunch. Janrees seemed downright happy about their demise.

Apparently, they were still in section one – the deepest area of the Boor base and so, knowing Argian building habits, the one most probably nearest the secret shrine of the ancient temple. Benny felt that same strange pull on her mind she’d felt before, a funny sort of pressure behind her ears. The emergency lighting was so dull, it was soporific, the temptation to just sleep...

She shook herself awake, forced herself to concentrate.

Bantagel was fiddling with some fibre optics beneath the reanimation console. Since they were cut off from the areas of the base still functioning, he was trying to get localised power working again, and Janrees was assisting him. As the High Boor had saved her

life, it seemed she felt obliged to repay him with some kind of service, however grudging. It seemed stupidly chivalrous considering what the Boor had done to her, but then she supposed Janrees was a warrior queen. And perhaps honour amongst thieves counted for something too. With all the Boor and Obvions crammed into this antechamber, and with Janrees and Bantagel the clear focus of attention, Benny felt a little like she was gatecrashing some bizarre wedding.

She couldn't imagine Bantagel in a morning suit. He reckoned that if worst came to worst they could all freeze themselves until help came, or until Venedel was habitable again. It wasn't much of a thought. Benny could feel the forces in this place, and had a fair suspicion what had really done for these hapless sleepers. She knew that if she went to sleep here in any form, she'd never wake again.

'What's that?' Forno squeaked, ears pricked, and Benny strained to hear herself.

A few moments later, further – and unwelcome – evidence supporting her theory of corridor-running arrived in the form of a small sweating crowd of Nishtubi, and Renad with a gaggle of natives. She steeled herself for a fight, but it was clear that this bunch were a) so exhausted they could barely stand and b) too terrified to be particularly threatening to anyone.

Particularly Renad, who looked as if his back had been peeled off him.

'Ilijah?' she asked.

'Demons,' panted Renad.

'He's right,' gasped the leading Nishtubi. 'They keep forming out of the air, killing anyone they can!'

'I've seen what you mean,' Benny assured him, suddenly wide awake again. 'Wonderful, Ilijah one way, red hot demons the other. But I get the final say in how we go,' she added, showing them Joseph, 'because this is a bomb. Okay?'

The newcomers stared at her, entirely nonplussed. She supposed one more threat hardly made much of a difference to them.

Then the biggest Nishtubi asked surlily, 'Where is General Maddaska?'

'Dead,' Bantagel called casually.

'Dead?' echoed Benny.

'I'm sorry, I should've told you,' Forno called.

'I can't say *I'm* sorry,' Arko said with feeling.

Bantagel seemed to agree. 'You leader now, Putin. Make the better job, and keep the civil tongue, right?'

Putin stared down at the floor. It was obvious to Benny he'd been running and running in the hope of finding his superior so he could pass over the responsibility for keeping his men alive. Unlucky,

thought Benny, sympathising with him. It don't often work out that way.

Suddenly the blue lights flooded back on, and the whine of the powerlines started back up.

'Success!' roared Bantagel from under the console. 'They soon freeze up again nicely.'

'They?' Benny queried.

'The cryo-chambers, schmuck,'

Forno started twittering again. 'I've thought of something –'

'Wait!' Benny shouted suddenly, cutting him off. 'Bantagel, that's it, don't you see? If you can freeze us...'

Janrees looked at her with growing realisation. 'We can freeze the Ilijah?'

'Lure them inside and throw the switch,' Arko said, suddenly animated. 'It could work!'

'The gods cannot be stopped by an alien trick,' Renad said, shaking with pain and fear. 'They are immortal. They will pursue us for ever.'

'Damn, he's got a point,' Arko admitted softly. 'How can we freeze a projection?'

'One problem at a time,' Benny said.

'Here another,' Bantagel said, gesturing impatiently at the control panel. 'Freezing controlled from this, Ilijah, they kill anyone who stand here waiting for them to go inside to the big freeze.'

Benny pointed to the far side of the chamber, where a hexagonal glass doorway glittered in the cold light. 'Doesn't that lead to another cryo-chamber?'

'Yeah, is like the others.'

Benny clapped her hands. 'So we can trap them in there.'

'We'll just have to cut through.' She paused. 'What were you saying, Forno?'

'Surely, with so much liquid everywhere now that the chambers have been defrosting, any sudden channelling of energy into –'

There was a massive explosion from inside the chamber. The glass door panel shattered as thousands of volts crackled round the wet walls.

But the rumbling, the tremors, didn't stop when the fierce energy died away. If anything, they got worse.

'It's set something off,' Benny said, wide-eyed. 'Some kind of chain reaction.'

Sure enough, the metal floor in the steaming cryo-chamber began to pucker and tear like tin foil. A narrow fissure opened up with a terrible sound, like a giant's bellow of anger, its black jagged path twinkling with sparks and small explosions as powerlines fractured. Outside the chamber, worrying cracks jigsawed down the walls and

rocks and mortar snowed down on them.

‘We have to get across,’ Benny shouted,’ before that crack in the floor gets any bigger!’

But before anyone could move, the dusty air suddenly shimmered with heat.

Then three of the demon projections fizzed into vision, facing them, staring them down. One was ancient, skeletal and toothy. One was wizened, malevolent, huge eyes pouring with blood. The other was cowed, hunched over itself, its features deformed, face crunched up beneath glutinous, bulging eyeballs.

One of the natives, staring in helpless horror at the apparitions, abruptly burst into evil-smelling flame, scattering those about him. A second later there was nothing left of him.

Two of Janrees’s followers screamed piercingly as the boggle-eyed killers burnt them alive.

‘Forgive us!’ Renad bawled up at the visions.

You did the same to so many people in the pits, Benny thought grimly. For the same reasons? To protect...

Bantagel was staring at the figures too, shaking his head in confused wonder. ‘Is just projections... Has to be...’

A Boor now fell to the wraiths’ fire, howling as his form unravelled in a blue flame until nothing was left.

Suddenly Shell lurched urgently forward from where she lay against the wall. ‘Nobody look at their eyes!’ she croaked.

‘They’ll be using your eyes to lock on to, as targets.’

‘Glad we brought you along,’ Benny said, tearing her gaze away. That dumb treatise of Shell’s had its uses after all, she decided. ‘Do it!’ she shouted for extra emphasis.

Benny heard a rustling of movement as everyone in the room either spun away or covered their eyes. From the crackle in the air, they could tell the apparitions were still hovering, waiting.

‘Why should it be...’ Arko muttered.

‘The Argians set great store by the eyes,’ Shell explained weakly. They’re always depicted so large in their art as a homage to the all-seeing oracle –’

‘No, pet,’ Arko said placing his paw over her mouth to silence her, ‘I mean, why *three* of them, here all at once. And why now?’

‘They’re designed to deal with intruders,’ said Shell.

‘I not an intruder,’ Bantagel snapped at her. ‘They never bother me before, and I build the place.’

‘It’s that split in the floor!’ Benny realised. ‘There must be something beneath it!’

An energy blast snaked out from the skeletal shape in the air and hit the wall. Putin cried out as his body was splashed with molten metal.

‘They may not be targeting properly but they’re still going to try to kill us,’ Janrees called.

‘We cross to the far side,’ Bantagel announced. ‘Now.’

As the terrified crowd started jostling each other to obey, a bumping and smashing started up from the bulkhead behind them. Benny shut her eyes, wearily.

‘The Ilijah have broken through again,’ Forno cried. Then he ducked with a shout as another blast of ruby light from the apparitions smacked into the wall directly above him. The metal steamed and started running like oil.

‘That’s the last barrier between us and them,’ Arko said, dragging Forno and Shell along with him. ‘It won’t hold them long. Come on!’

Silently, the spectres in the air bobbed along after them as the bulkhead, already weakened from the tremors and the fire ray, began to split and crack under the Ilijah’s assault.

Starl had spent so many minutes trying to coax some kind of recognisable signal from the communications gear that when the voices burst violently from the speakers in the Nishtubi ship, he and Han jumped in surprise.

‘...clear to launch.’

‘Warheads armed, Control. Targets locked.’

‘Proceed upon signal, V-17.’

‘It’s no good,’ Han whispered, staring at Starl wide-eyed in alarm. ‘We’re too late!’

‘No.’ Starl smashed his fist down on the console. ‘No!’

19 Cold Oracle

Having run the marathon, Benny now felt she was taking part in a 200-metre sprint at the school sports day from hell. Or perhaps it was more like an ancient Earth game she'd heard of, British Bulldog. She was just one of a surreal mixture of people, be they furry, sludgy, half-naked or leathery, trying desperately to get from one side of this shattered body-strewn field to the other. But instead of big kids with spiteful grins barring their way, hoping to stop their schoolmates' progress across the battlefield, the three wraiths hovered vengefully over them all, blasting them to ash one by one.

But still the survivors kept on. Benny could see that Forno had reached the hatchway to the next chamber and was pointing to the door control. A Boor ripped off the protective covering with a pinch of his fingers, and the door vanished unsteadily upwards. The noises of the Ilijah at the door were echoing like pounding tribal drums around them, driving them on. Benny slipped and skidded, and found herself sliding on her back through an icy slurry towards the split in the ground. An unearthly glow was spilling from the fissure; was something on fire, or...?

Her approach slowed as the floor reached upwards to the point of the fracture, but Benny knew she had to see for herself now. She pulled dead men out of her way. She could feel the power in the cold air as she looked over the precipice.

Through the split she discerned the rock beneath was no kind of floor, it was a heavy stone ceiling, one that now had begun to crumble away. She was looking down into a vault of some kind, crammed full of treasure, lit as if by a golden lamp.

There were trinkets and golden artefacts piled high, but Benny couldn't take her eyes from the huge bronze sphere nestling in a cobwebbed cauldron. On to its polished surface dots and lines had been traced and carved, a geometry she had never seen before. The patterns seemed to shift and blur, the craftsmanship so complex that, for those few, lingering seconds she had it in clear sight, she imagined she could be looking at a map of the entire universe. She remembered those tiny fragments of schematic Braxiatel had showed her back in Archaeology, an age ago now.

'Goddess,' she whispered, and it seemed to glow brighter as she spoke. She knew she was staring at the Argian Oracle.

Her reverie was shattered as a blast from above crackled into the ground beside her. It was like an elephant had stamped in a puddle, and Benny threw herself aside as splashes of molten metal and steaming ice drenched her.

She opened her eyes to find the three ghastly apparitions hovering only inches from her face, and shouted in horror. She shut her eyes, tried to slither away and felt another blistering blast close by.

‘Where is he!’ she shouted to the treasure chamber below, desperate now, chilled to the bone by the icy puddles she lay in, flushed and frightened. She felt for the coins in her pocket and hurled them down through the gap, praying she was doing the right thing. ‘Oracle, tell me! Tell me the whereabouts of Jason Kane.’

She peered over the lip of the ridge as an image started to form, indistinct, hazy, but gradually solidifying. Her heart seemed lodged in her throat. Tears were squeezing from her astonished eyes.

‘Clear a path, huh!’ Bantagel shouted, and found time for a brief grunt of satisfaction as his men shoved everyone ahead of him out of the way. ‘I got to get this baby powered different, right?’

‘Right,’ the little rat said. ‘I think that if you wire up –’

‘I know what to do,’ Bantagel shouted at him.

‘Then do it you ugly idiot!’ Forno roared, before clamping a hairy hand over his own mouth as if to shut himself up.

Bantagel decided he’d have to let that impudence go for now, but if that rat was around the second he’d switched the circuits...

He frowned. Assuming he *could* switch the circuits...

Slowly, the images were becoming coherent, were *meaning* something to Benny. She felt as if she were suddenly remembering in detail a glorious, warm and wonderful dream, the cruel kind that always fades the moment you wake, leaving you empty and lonely on a new morning.

Don’t let the bombs fall now, she thought desperately.

Please. Not now.

And then she saw nothing at all as another blast shot down from above, rupturing a power cable with a flash that seemed to burn out her vision. She blinked furiously, pounding her fists against the frozen floor with frustration as the images broiled away. Fierce sparks flew from the thick plastic snake full of wires as it struggled and wriggled and spat power at the ancient artefacts. The wraiths seemed to descend through the floor as if returning to hell, to deal with this apparent new interloper seeking to steal their secrets, to protect at all costs these sacred relics.

Benny wanted to weep. The sparks drove her back, away from the split. And the explosion that suddenly blossomed red and orange from out of the fissure threw her metres through the air. She landed heavily on the cold stiff bodies of the dead, stunned, speechless, ears ringing.

As her hearing filtered back she realised dimly that the pounding echoing around her had stopped.

‘Benny!’

‘No one here but us dead men,’ she muttered.

‘Benny! Are you all right?’

She arched her head back and saw through bleary eyes that Arko was calling to her from the far side of the chamber.

‘Come on! They’re through!’

Looking back, following his stare, she saw the first of the Ilijah peering into the cryo-chamber, picking at a fallen body to see how it tasted.

‘Benny...’ Arko started running towards her.

‘I was so close!’ she screamed out. ‘So close to finding him!’

Arko stared at her in puzzlement. ‘Come *on*, Benny!’

By the screech the Ilijah gave as she staggered clumsily to her feet and set off to reach Arko, she knew it had seen her.

‘I thought you were with us!’ Arko said breathlessly, meeting her half way. ‘Come on, Bantagel won’t wait till we’re clear before he sets the stasis field going.’

Benny tried to focus on him, still dazed. ‘He’s got it working?’

‘Not yet, but he will,’ Arko said, sprinting for the boundary, dragging her along after him as rasping calls echoed ever louder and pattering footfalls started splashing and scattering towards them. ‘He has to!’

Another tremor battered at the chamber, and Benny found the ground seemed to vanish from under her. Her backside found it before the rest of her did, and her spine jarred with the impact.

And from Arko’s shout of warning, and from the closeness of the splashing and screeching behind her, Benny knew that the Ilijah were about to find her.

‘We’ve got to stop them attacking!’ Han shouted. ‘If the evidence is destroyed...’

‘Benny’s down there too, remember,’ Starl snapped. ‘All right,’ he said, seizing hold of the controls, boosting the engines.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m going to start a fight,’ Starl said.

Han gaped. ‘With the entire Federation fleet? You’re mad.’

‘Desperate, certainly.’

The voice of the gunship’s pilot crackled over the speakers.

‘This is V-17. Control, I have an unidentified craft coming out of Venedel on attack trajectory.’

‘That’s us!’ beamed Starl.

‘All intelligence says Venedel does not have space travel capacity –’

‘Coming at me on vector 6’12.’

‘He’s very good,’ Starl murmured.

‘Reading you,’ snapped Control. ‘Unidentified craft on vector 6’12. Stand down attack, stand down attack.’

Han looked at him in amazement. ‘Yes!’

‘V’s 10 through 16,’ Control went on. ‘Engage and destroy unidentified craft.’

Pinpricks of light grew bigger on the viewscreen, eclipsing stars as they approached.

‘Tell them who you are!’ Han yelled.

‘You think they’d listen? Even if I *wasn’t* attacking their fleet, I have no official existence to anyone except my immediate superiors.’

Two pink buds broke away from the largest of the approaching lights. A siren went off in the Nishtubi flight deck, and a few seconds later the ship shook and the lighting dipped.

‘Six against one!’ Han yelled helplessly.

‘And that’s just for starters,’ Starl muttered, taking evasive action. ‘Here we go again.’

‘I do it!’ Bantagel shouted. ‘It works!’

Janrees seized his arm, laughing with relief.

‘Now we end this,’ the High Boor said, fat fingers knocking at the controls.

‘But Benny’s not clear!’ the little rat shrieked, hovering over his shoulder.

The sick woman nodded. ‘You must wait for her.’

‘Sure,’ Bantagel gurgled. ‘In the next world.’

He reached for the activation switch.

20 On Ice

‘Benny you can make it!’ Arko screamed at her. ‘The last few metres...’

Stumbling, slipping, Benny shut her eyes, followed his voice.

‘*Benny!*’

Threw herself towards him.

There was a noise as if the air around her was being ripped in half. Then a burning smell, like cordite.

Benny lay flat on her face, barely daring to breathe.

‘Will you look at that,’ Arko muttered.

Benny turned, almost afraid to see.

Caught in midair on the very cusp of the second chamber, were two Ilijah, claws reaching out murderously for Benny’s flesh. Dozens more were trapped behind them in awkward, unnatural poses, as if the air had turned to crystal around them.

‘He did it,’ Benny whispered. ‘It actually worked.’

‘You did it!’ Arko called back behind them, presumably to Bantagel. ‘Got them all, come and see!’

‘Yeah, you *all* come see!’ came Bantagel’s throaty warble from the corridor outside. ‘See what I do, huh?’

Obediently, the crowd of women and Boor followed him into the room.

‘What about the apparitions?’ Janrees called.

‘I think they’ve shorted themselves out,’ Benny said flatly.

‘The treasures they were here to guard have been destroyed.’

‘It is well,’ Janrees said with satisfaction.

Benny just stared at her.

‘There are still the bombs ready to drop on us,’ Putin muttered grimly, but his Nishtubi followed on, cautious hope starting to soften their grim faces. Benny and Arko got out of their way, let them pass in silence.

Benny considered Putin’s words as the soothing sound of relieved chatter started to grow louder in the chamber. “Still the bombs...” She thought of Starl, wondered where he was now. One crisis was taken care of, but there always seemed to be another. She had to have faith; even though her hopes for Jason had been crushed once again, she had to believe there was *some* hope that the rest of their problems might be ended.

But they were still trapped here underground, with the Boor and Janrees, their endless gangster followers, the Nishtubi and...

Benny suddenly began to run faster, overtaking Arko. Renad and his

clutch of natives were peering cautiously into the room. 'No, not you lot,' Benny said, her voice low. 'You stay out here, with us.'

Renad looked at her strangely, but obeyed. Probably because he was too exhausted to move.

She found Forno looking nervously over the control panel outside the chamber.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' she said.

Forno looked up and nodded. 'I'm just not sure I can do it.'

'You have to,' Benny said softly. 'Come on, you *have* to.'

Forno nodded, his sensitive paws fiddling nervously with both his whiskers and the controls. 'I have to,' he kept muttering to himself. Gradually, Benny could hear real conviction creeping into his voice.

'Hey, what be you doing out there?' Bantagel called out, suddenly suspicious.

'Forno?' She looked at him, hopefully.

He nodded back solemnly.

'Come in here where I can see you,' the High Boor shouted, rumbling back across the chamber towards them.

'I don't think so,' Benny called cheerily. 'Sorry.'

Forno started pressing buttons.

'I kill you when I reach you,' Bantagel spat.

'Don't you think you might have killed enough people for a while?' she shouted back.

'Bomb or no bomb, you a dead girl.'

Benny's eyes narrowed. 'You hold that thought,' she said.

She watched him and his hordes get closer. Then, in the blink of an eye, the air itself seemed to freeze over inside the chamber. Bantagel, Janrees, Putin, everybody, was suddenly frozen in time, outraged waxworks encased in ice.

'You hold that thought for a very, very long time.'

Renad stared stupidly at the sight. Benny trudged over to Forno and wearily hugged him. Then she felt Arko's body pressed against hers as he joined the hug, and Shell's hair tickling her face.

'Death will still fall from the sky,' she heard Renad say, cheerful as ever.

'All we can do is wait and see,' Benny said, wiping her eyes which were suddenly hot with tears. 'Think of Starl and cross your fingers.'

'Gravity locks gone down,' Starl shouted over the din of the sirens in the darkened flight deck. The Nishtubi ship was spinning over and over helplessly through space as the attack intensified.

'I can't take much more of this!' Han bawled.

'Neither can the ship.' Starl wrestled with the controls, but she was sluggish now, her power too depleted to manoeuvre in time.

‘V-14 to Control, target coming into range, I have a clear shot.’

Control’s voice was, as ever, calm and impassive. ‘V-17, prime warhead for launching. Proceed, V-14. This little sideshow is over.’

‘Come on,’ Starl hissed at the unresponsive controls, slapping his palms down on top of the touchscreens. ‘Come on!’

‘In range,’ V-14 reported.

‘Wait!’

Both Starl and Han spun their heads round to stare at the speaker in disbelief.

Han turned to Starl. ‘Then –’

‘Abort attack, V-14,’ Control said haltingly, but still in the same calm monotone. ‘New instructions reaching us here. V-17, stand down. Repeat, stand down...’

Anything else Control had to say was lost amid almighty shrieks of delight and relief in the Nishtubi ship.

Joseph announced the passing minutes like a master of ceremonies reading out a list of special guests.

Benny and her team waited tensely for over an hour before allowing themselves to accept Joseph’s casual exhortation that the danger of imminent attack was over.

They screamed and shouted in celebration, making more noise and whooping screeches than a million Ilijah. Even Renad and his people went from looking on in confusion to gradually joining in as they realised that the Thane’s old kingdom would still stand.

As the noise of their celebration echoed crazily round the silent base, Bantagel and his would-be army of gangsters were left staring sullenly on, as if peering in at a party through high windows, left out in the cold.

Epilogue

The Survivors

‘I can’t believe you did it,’ Benny said to Starl. ‘And in *this* thing.’

The Nishtubi ship looked a real state in the wake of Starl’s lashed-up repairs, but he smiled and patted the console. ‘They may be crap archaeologists, but their ships aren’t so bad. How I got her down without the gravity locks kicking in...’

‘Yes, well, enough of the bluff pilot’s talk,’ she said, uncomfortably aware that Starl was looking at her intently.

‘It’s good to see you again,’ he said.

‘Yeah, you too,’ she said blandly. ‘Whatever your real name is.’ ‘Look, Benny...’

‘I know. You were just doing your job.’ She smiled. ‘Suppose I should just be grateful that you did it, shouldn’t I? Or else none of us would be here now.’

‘Well, I’m grateful to you for putting that gangster convention on ice, believe me,’ he said. ‘And since you got hold of the cure we need, it won’t take the quarantine squad long to burn out every last trace of the Ilijah from Venedel.’

‘Damn, we’re good,’ Benny deadpanned.

He moved over and held her gently by the shoulders. ‘I’m sorry you didn’t find what you were looking for.’

‘At least I found what *you* were looking for,’ she said.

‘And found your team again. And got everyone through it alive.’

She shrugged and looked up at him. ‘What will happen to your Federation now?’

‘Well, with all Han knows...’ Starl whistled. ‘And we’ve got some expert witnesses frozen in that base. With the likes of Bantagel and Janrees, who were actually there when all this stuff went down... There’ll be trials dragging on for years, decades maybe. Every bit of filth and corruption will be dug out and put on display.’

‘Sure that’s wise? Will anyone still want to be a part of the Earthlink? It could be the end.’

Now it was Starl’s turn to shrug. ‘Or a new beginning.’

‘Oh,’ Benny said wistfully. ‘Yes, one of those.’ She forced a smile. ‘Which reminds me, thanks for arranging my transport back to Brax. Arko and the gang can’t wait.’

‘There’s still three hours before it arrives. Along with the rest of the mopper-uppers,’ Starl brooded.

‘I imagine you’ll be kept pretty busy after that,’ Benny said.

He nodded silently. Then he held out a hand, a boyish smile on his

face. 'Stay with me till then?'

Benny sighed, closed her eyes.

She took the hand.

Some time later, Renad watched the spaceship blast off, taking Benny and her aliens away, from his uncomfortable perch on the Thane's old throne of solitude. Now, the woods were busy with more aliens in protective suits. These aliens, Starl had said, would ensure that the rest of the Ilijah would soon be dead.

Renad found he was happy to believe that, with or without the favour of his gods.

There was a noise from behind him. Renad saw the ragged, sorry-looking shape of Hoodath standing in the doorway.

They regarded each other in silence for some time.

'My book has been destroyed,' Hoodath said.

Renad looked away, nodded.

'Not by you. By the aliens. They said they would take it to the stars, but they burnt it on the ground.' Hoodath clenched his fists. 'You were right, Renad. No aliens can be trusted.'

Renad looked up at the skies, as the trail of the alien rocket grew fainter in the sky. 'I have been made to question my beliefs, Hoodath.' He sighed heavily. 'And now, all I believe is that I was wrong.'

Hoodath was looking at him in surprise. 'I was told by the old Thane to write an epitaph to our people, to our culture, all our lives.'

'And did you?'

Hoodath held out a blackened scrap of paper. Renad reached for it automatically, but the scribe shook his head. He screwed it up, let it fall to the ground.

'It seems we few live on.'

Renad smiled faintly. 'Your book – and our past, with it – has been destroyed. But that is good, Hoodath. Today, all old truths and half-truths and falsehoods are destroyed. The aliens will take what they need from our temple and leave.'

Hoodath nodded. 'But leave us with what?' he said distantly.

'What can there be now for our people?'

'A living story,' Renad said, rising from the throne. 'That is what I shall help uncover... and what you shall write about.'

Then Renad held out his hand to Hoodath, as Starl and Benny had done to him.

By the time the rocket's trail had faded completely from the sky, Hoodath had taken Renad's hand in his own.

Benny smiled to see the looks on the faces of Arko, Forno and Shell as the image of their benefactor and inspiration, Irving Braxiatel, appeared on the viewscreen of their Federation cruiser. In particular

she smiled to see Shell looking so much better, relaxing on the black leather couch in the rec room, and with her hand so firmly intertwined with Arko's.

In an excited babble, they blurted out some semblance of the events that had befallen them in the last few days.

Braxiatel's keen eyes soon glazed over, and he waved them down to a giggling, slightly hysterical hush.

'Anyway, the important thing is,' Arko said, 'that Starl has guaranteed us the opportunity to exhume what's left of the temple, just as soon as they've cleared out the Boor's base!'

Forno nodded. 'And everything we find can be displayed in your collection!'

'Didn't think you liked fieldwork,' Shell said lightly.

'I've never had so much fun in my life,' Forno said solemnly, to several sets of raised eyebrows.

'Well, I look forward to hearing all about your adventures when you arrive,' Braxiatel said. 'But there's something else you'll have to deal with first, Benny.'

'Oh?'

'I've got Miss Jones entertaining some kind of alien pilot here, insisting he sees you. He's got your card, and he's most indignant. Claims he's been cheated out of a job – a job that *you* offered him.'

'Uh-oh,' Benny said.

'Mister Crofton is most intrigued by him.' Braxiatel leaned conspiratorially closer. 'Between you and me, this pilot looks like an oversized turnip with a bunch of grapes on his head.'

Benny closed her eyes and groaned. 'I think we'll cut this transmission short, Brax,' she said, picking up the handset and flicking off the screen as the others started to laugh. 'Out.'

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Stephen Cole, December 2000

About the Author

A trawl through Amazon will reveal that **STEPHEN COLE** has written a quite strange assortment of books for everything from *Walking with Dinosaurs* to *Charlie's Angels*. However, he didn't write the book on Noel Coward. Nor is he a jazz musician. There are lots of other things he wishes he could say he never did in his life, but happily, writing this book isn't one of them.

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